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**Wang Shuo and the
Commercialisation of Contemporary
Chinese Culture**

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University of Durham**

PhD Thesis

2006



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Abstract

Wang Shuo and the Commercialisation of Contemporary Chinese Culture

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This thesis examines the commercialisation of Chinese culture that has taken place over the past twenty years in mainland China. It explores the contribution of Wang Shuo, a cultural figure who straddles different fields of culture, moving from literature to the ultimate mass culture medium of television. This study plots Wang Shuo's development from educational failure, to business failure, to fiction writer, film & TV editor, film director and cultural critic and analyst. His stories, films, TV series and articles have caused shock-waves throughout national cultural circles as he has transformed the terms of the debate from academic discourse to a validation of the role of the market in the culture field. Although Wang Shuo has not been labeled as a dissident, his approach to the culture market has had a more subversive effect on official ideology that those overt dissidents who have had to live in exile or have been imprisoned. He has utilised the language of official ideology to satirise the authorities, turning the ideology and its supporters into figures of fun. Yet his own goals have been strictly personal and economic ones. The authorities recognize the value of Wang Shuo's work in the cultural market but at the same time distrust his works and place him under strict censorship. Examining the way Wang Shuo and people surround him have succeeded in different fields of cultural achievement is a mirror to understanding the process of the transformation of contemporary Chinese culture from a socialist state-controlled culture to a market-oriented mass culture industry.

DECLARATION

I confirm that no part of the material offered has previously been submitted by me for a degree in this or any other university.

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ROMANISATION

With the exception of certain published source titles and names of authors, including people from Taiwan and Hong Kong, the spelling of Chinese words follows the *pinyin* system of romanisation.

TRANSLATION

Unless cited from a non-Chinese language source, all translations are the work of the author.

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Introduction

This research focuses on Wang Shuo's contribution to the development of a commercial culture in China. How was Wang Shuo able to exert such great influence over such a wide spectrum of contemporary Chinese culture? Previous studies have concentrated on aspects of Wang Shuo's art, especially his literary works, or his influence on society, but this is only a partial view of Wang Shuo, and does not account for the pervasiveness of his influence. In particular it underrates his great impact on TV and cinematic art, his contribution to the commercialization of culture, and his intellectual iconoclasm. He came in as an outsider, without higher education and without help of a rich or powerful family. He even turned his back on one of the other avenues to advancement in contemporary China, the military career. In spite of all this, he has outflanked the old intellectuals, party members and scions of leading families to emerge triumphant time and again at the cutting edge of new developments in commercial culture in China. Although he himself is not currently active writing or producing, Wang Shuo's coterie continues to dominate popular TV drama and film and he still acts as mentor to them, because of his creativity and commercially acute antennae. In the West, Wang Shuo-like figures, individuals who behave outrageously, can rely on the popular media to build them up, but in China the media were very different, hence Wang Shuo had to be his own publicist too. He combined a range of talents: high sensitivity to cultural, social and political currents, a tremendous ear for language, media savvy, an entrepreneurial spirit, originality and creativity, and an impressive 'ability to think outside the box'. In the West he would have won many awards recognizing his outstanding contribution, but in China the rules are different.



My starting point was to look at the development of mass and popular culture. I investigated Western cultural theories that I believed would help understand the development of a commercial mass culture in contemporary China. Principal among these theories is the Frankfurt School's concept of 'mass culture' and the 'culture industry' and the Birmingham School's 'sub-culture' theory. Modern commercial culture and its studies in the West were developed under the capitalist economic system; the positive and negative aspects of this commercialised culture have been clear to Westerners for some time, helping the authorities to reform and refine their culture policies. Many of the problems that have developed in China have already been faced in the West, hence this research is very relevant to my study.

My research is based on studying the major fictional and critical works of Wang Shuo, watching his films and TV series, reading his critics and reading widely on modern culture in China in order to place him in his artistic, political and commercial environment and attempt to evaluate his contribution in these areas. My contribution to research on Wang Shuo offers my own views on his fiction then concentrates on aspects not covered in depth by previous researchers. Specifically, I consider: Wang Shuo's influence on commercial entertainment film-making and indoor TV serials and sitcom making since the 1980s; Wang Shuo's contribution as a challenging and financially successful character who brought changes to the payment system to writers; Wang Shuo's contribution as a cultural critic in stirring up controversy over the Jin Yong craze and the obsequious, academically valueless research on Lu Xun. I also examine the reactions of Chinese and Western critics to Wang Shuo's literary works grouped according to theme, with special attention to Wang Shuo's unique writing style.

The first chapter is about Wang Shuo's life experiences, as an inspirational resource for of his works and for the deep effect they have had on his attitude towards his creative writing and film and TV serial making.

In the second chapter, I analyze some of Wang Shuo's fictional works, including his love stories. Wang Shuo's works have been grouped by theme and characteristic; for example: challenging the concept of literature; criticizing hypocritical intellectuals; portraying the desires for money and sex of the younger generation; satirizing current political and commercial trends; and revealing the childhood of a rebellious youth. Wang Shuo's writing style has been examined, including his trademark Beijing language style and unique way of satirizing official political language.

The third chapter focuses on Wang Shuo's contributions to the entertainment film industry and TV soap-drama making, including the 1988 'year of Wang Shuo', a landmark in the history of the Chinese film industry; it examines also Wang Shuo's mentorship role over leading film and TV drama directors.

The fourth chapter deals with Wang Shuo's contribution to promoting reform of the payment system for writers. Wang Shuo, as the first freelance millionaire writer since the People's Republic of China was founded, won through in the face of bitter opposition from entrenched forces.

The fifth chapter focuses on Wang Shuo as an iconoclastic cultural critic, raising controversial points and willing to be different from the majority and the mainstream.

Wang became the centre of major controversy over his criticisms of Jin Yong's best-selling martial arts fiction and over his forthright attacks on the hagiography of Lu Xun, officially promoted over the last fifty years. These were unprecedented challenges to the academics, who were used to looking down patronizingly on Wang Shuo as a 'hooligan'.

Research Sources on Wang Shuo

My research on Wang Shuo and commercial culture in contemporary China started at the end of the 1990s. In addition to general works on culture theory I have used three main types of specialist resource relating to Wang Shuo for my work. The first is Wang Shuo's own works, including his stories, novels, essays, films and TV dramas, etc. These consist of fiction collected in his *Wang Shuo wenji* 王朔文集 (The Collected Works of Wang Shuo, 1995)¹, and his late 1990s novels published separately, such as *Kan shang qu hen mei* 看上去很美 (It Looks Beautiful, 1999).² Many of his essays are collected in *Wuzhizhe wuwei* 无知者无畏 (The Ignorant Know No Fear, 2000).³ Representative films include *Wan zhu* 顽主 (The Operators, 1988, based on an earlier short story of the same name)⁴, and *Wo ai ni* 我爱你 (I Love You, 2002).⁵ His two TV soap operas, which date from the early 1990s are *Kewang* 渴望

¹ *Wang Shuo wenji* 王朔文集 (The Collected Works of Wang Shuo), Beijing: Huayi chubanshe 华艺出版社, 1995, 4 vols.

² *Kan shang qu hen mei* 看上去很美 (It Looks Beautiful), Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1999

³ *Wuzhizhe wuwei* 无知者无畏 (The Ignorant Know No Fear), Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 2000

⁴ *Wan Zhu* 顽主 (The Operators), directed by Mi Jiashan 米家山, edited by Wang Shuo, E'mei Film Studio, 1988

⁵ *Wo ai ni* 我爱你 (I Love You), based on *Guo ba yin jiu si* 过把瘾就死 (Enjoy then Die), directed by Zhang Yuan 张元, Beijing Film Studio, 2002

(Yearning, 1990)⁶ and *Bianjibu de gushi* 编辑部的故事 (Stories from the Editorial Office, 1991).⁷ Wang Shuo produced an autobiographical work *Wo shi Wang Shuo* 我是王朔 (I am Wang Shuo)⁸ in 1992, and a work of criticism in the form of a dialogue with another critic, soubriquet Lao Xia, entitled *Meiren zeng wo menghanyao* 美人赠我蒙汗药 (Her Beauty is Like a Narcotic)⁹ in 2000.

The second type of resource is articles and books written by critics and academics about Wang Shuo's works and cultural events connected with Wang Shuo. Some of these are available on the Chinese Academic Journal Network (www.cnki.net 中国学术期刊网); others have appeared in books of collected articles, for example *Mingren yanzhong de Wang Shuo* 名人眼中的王朔 (Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes, 1993)¹⁰ edited by Liang Tian, and *Wang Shuo tiaozhan Jin Yong* 王朔挑战金庸 (Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong, 1999)¹¹ edited by Zhang Feng.

Some of the most useful articles include the following. On Wang Shuo's stories, there is Wang Yichuan's article 'Yuyan shenhua de zhongjie' 语言神话的终结 'The End of the Language Fairytale'¹² published in 1999. Wang Yichuan suggests that a major

⁶ *Kewang* 渴望 (Yearning), directed by Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙, co-edited by Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙, Li Xiaoming 李晓明, Wang Shuo 王朔, Zheng Wanlong 郑万隆, Chen Changben 陈常本, 1990

⁷ *Bianjibu de gushi* 编辑部的故事 (Stories from the Editorial Office), directed by Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙 & Zhao Baogang 赵宝刚, edited by Wang Shuo 王朔 & Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚, 1991

⁸ *Wo shi Wang Shuo*, 我是王朔 (I am Wang Shuo), Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 1992

⁹ *Meiren zeng wo menghanyao* 美人赠我蒙汗药 (Her Beauty is Like a Narcotic), Wang Shuo & Lao Xia 老霞, Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2000

¹⁰ Liang Tian 梁天 (ed.), *Mingren yan zhong de Wang Shuo* 名人眼中的王朔 (Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes), Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1993

¹¹ Zhang Feng 张峰 (ed.), *Wang Shuo tiaozhan Jin Yong* 王朔挑战金庸 (Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong), Guangzhou: Guangzhou chubanshe, 1999

¹² Wang Yichuan 王一川, 'Yuyan shenhua de zhongjie' 语言神话的终结 (The End of the Language Fairytale), *Xuexi yu tansuo* 学习与探索 (Studies and Explorations), 1999, vol. 3, pp.111-116

factor in Wang Shuo's success was the 'language fairytale' that exerted an enormous influence on society, although it had come to an end by the late 1990s. This article made me realize the level of originality and influence of Wang Shuo's 'language fairytale'. Chen Xiaoming's 'Ya wenhua: Wang Shuo de shengming chongli' 亚文化: 王朔的生命冲力 'Subculture: Wang Shuo's Impulsive Life Force',¹³ published in 1993, uses the Western concept of subculture to analyse Wang Shuo's rebellious spirit. Chen compares him to the behavioural patterns of Western youth in his behaviour.

Dai Jinhua's book *Wu zhong feng jing* 雾中风景 (Scenes in the Fog, 2000)¹⁴ examines Wang Shuo's films, especially underlining the huge influence of the 'Wang Shuo group' in contemporary Chinese film and TV. The most financially successful film director in contemporary China, Feng Xiaogang, wrote in his autobiography *Wo ba qingchun xiangei ni* 我把青春献给你 (I Offer My Youth to You, 2003)¹⁵ how strongly his film style has been influenced by Wang Shuo, and that every success in his career is linked to Wang Shuo; this indicates the extent to which Wang Shuo is still an inspiration for mass audience art.

On cultural criticism, Ning Zongyi's article 'Wang Shuo ping Jin Yong yinfa de sikao' 王朔评金庸引发的思考 'The Thinking Behind Wang Shuo's Criticism of Jin

¹³ Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, 'Ya wenhua: Wang Shuo de shengming chongli' 亚文化: 王朔的生命冲力 (Subculture: Wang Shuo's Impulsive Life Force), *Qingchun wuhui: Wang Shuo yinshi zuopin ji* 青春无悔: 王朔影视作品集 (A Youth of No Regrets: Collected Works of Wang Shuo's TV Serials and Films), Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1993, pp.363-365

¹⁴ Dai Jinhua 戴锦华 *Wu zhong feng jing* 雾中风景 (Scenes in the Fog), Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000

¹⁵ Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚, *Wo ba qingchun xiangei ni* 我把青春献给你 (I Offer My Youth To You), Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2003

Yong¹⁶ in 2000 compares the creative writing attitudes, characteristics and styles, life experiences and stand-points of Jin Yong and Wang Shuo; this is a perceptive article on Wang Shuo's criticism of Jin Yong. Zhang Mengyang, a researcher specifically dedicated to studying Lu Xun, produced an article 'Wo guan Wang Shuo kan Lu Xun' 我观王朔看鲁迅 'I Observe How Wang Shuo Sees Lu Xun'¹⁷ in 2000 presenting a frank description of Lu Xun studies over the past fifty years in China, in which he supports many of the critical arguments of Wang Shuo on Lu Xun's works and, especially, Lu Xun researchers.

The third type of resource is books, articles, films and TV dramas revealing important cultural trends and phenomena since the 1980s, such as Ni Zhen's *Gaige yu Zhongguo dianying* 改革与中国电影 (Reform and Chinese Film, 1994)¹⁸ which reviewed the development of Chinese film from the beginning of economic reform at the end of 1970s to the early 1990s. Qi Shuyu's *Shichang jingji xia de Zhongguo wenxue yishu* 市场经济下的中国文学艺术 (Chinese Literature and Art under the Market Economy, 1998)¹⁹ provides an overview of the positive and negative influences of the market economy on Chinese literature and art, and how some of the writers and artists became financial success stories, while others could not survive in the market environment. Fiction by other writers from the 1980s to the present has been used for

¹⁶ Ning Zongyi 宁宗一, 'Wang Shuo ping Jin Yong yinfa de sikao' 王朔评金庸引发的思考 (The Thinking Behind Wang Shuo's Criticism of Jin Yong), *Yinshan xuekan* 阴山学刊 (Yinshan Journal), 2000, vol. 13, No. 2 pp.56-59

¹⁷ Zhang Mengyang 张梦阳, 'Wo guan Wang Shuo kan Lu Xun' 我观王朔看鲁迅 (I Observe How Wang Shuo Sees Lu Xun), *Wenxue ziyou tan* 文学自由谈 (Free Forum of Literature), 2000, vol. 4, pp.93-101

¹⁸ Ni Zhen 倪震, *Gaige yu Zhongguo dianying* 改革与中国电影 (Reform and Chinese Film), Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1994

¹⁹ Qi Shuyu 祁述裕, *Shichang jingji xia de zhongguo wenxue yishu* 市场经济下的中国文学艺术 (Chinese Literature and Art under the Market Economy), Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998.

comparison with Wang Shuo; these writers include Zhang Chengzhi, Liang Xiaosheng, Wang Anyi, Wang Meng, Jin Yong, Zhang Jie, Wang Xiaobo, Tie Ning, Chi Li, Liu Zhenyun and Wei Hui. Also films and TV dramas made by other film directors and script-writers since the 1980s have provided important background knowledge and critical standards for the study of Wang Shuo's films and TV dramas. These include films made by the fifth generation directors Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Feng Xiaogang; the sixth generation film directors Zhang Yuan and Jia Zhangke; and the actor turned film director Jiang Wen. Films made by Taiwan and Hong Kong film directors, such as Hsiao-Hsien Hou, Ang Lee and Kar-wai Wong, have also been consulted, as have TV dramas made by Zhao Baogang and by the first sitcom director Ying Da. In addition, articles by critics on the above cultural products and cultural figures have been used to provide background material for my study.

Five PhD theses produced in America about Wang Shuo were started in the mid-1990s. Their research focused either on Wang Shuo's stories and novels, or focused on Wang Shuo's social influence, referred to at the time as the 王朔现象 'Wang Shuo phenomenon'.

Han Chen's PhD thesis *Critical Perspectives of Desire and Communist Idealism from Post-Mao Chinese Writers: Wang Anyi and Wang Shuo*²⁰ (1995) demonstrates that Wang Anyi and Wang Shuo destabilized the dominant cultural logic by reviving, re-evaluating and restructuring what is officially considered 'subversive', 'transgressive' and 'bourgeois'. Firstly, Han Chen evaluates the transformation of post-Mao Chinese

²⁰ Chen, Han. PhD Dissertation, *Critical Perspectives of Desire and Communist Idealism from Post-Mao Chinese Writers: Wang Anyi and Wang Shuo*, UMI Company, United State, 1996 (The University of Texas at Austin, 1995)

literature, and then examines a romantic trilogy by Wang Anyi in the second and third chapters. In the fourth and fifth chapters, six items of fiction by Wang Shuo are analyzed and classified into two groups: the sentimental trilogy, including “Air Hostess”, “Floating above the Sea”, and “Half Seawater Half Fire”, and the gangster trilogy including “Rubber Man”, “The Operators”, and *Playing for Thrills*. Han Chen reviews the characteristics of Wang Shuo’s gangsters according to the issues of idealism and materialism; gender and sex; and morality and crime. Han Chen sees awareness of a cultural crisis in the transition from communist to capitalist ideology as a major question raised by Wang Shuo in his fiction.

In Donghui Li’s PhD thesis, entitled *The “Phenomenon” of Wang Shuo: A Historico-Literary Consideration*²¹ (1999), he assesses the ‘Wang Shuo Phenomenon’ by placing it in historical-literary perspective. He analyzes it through three waves of debate amongst literary critics, intellectuals and readers, which took place in 1989, 1993 and 1995. Some fundamental issues considered in the thesis are: different conceptions of the function of literature in society; the role and responsibility of the writer; and the status, authority and purpose of the intelligentsia in a China undergoing profound economic and social transformation. Li thinks that Wang Shuo’s characters (anti-heroes), central themes (anti-control, maximizing personal choice and personal responsibility) and the genius of his language (unique utilization of *tiaokan*) are the three most important factors that thrust him on to the centre stage. Li concludes that Wang Shuo’s works contributed to shifting the consensus of the modern Chinese literary tradition to legitimization of the individual and individual

²¹ Li, Donghui. PhD. Dissertation, *The ‘Phenomenon’ of Wang Shuo: A Historico-Literary Consideration*, UMI Company, United State, (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999)

free-will in contemporary literature. This is the reason Wang Shuo has become the most popular and most controversial writer in contemporary China.

Huazhi Wang's PhD dissertation *Problematizing the Nation: The "Wang Shuo Phenomenon" and Contemporary Chinese Culture*²² (1999) emphasizes that Wang Shuo, as a representative of the new generation in communist China, has acted in the dual role of transmitter and terminator of socialist revolutionary culture. Huazhi Wang argues that: Wang Shuo and his 'wise-guy' characters challenged the authority of the nation-state and conventional social values; they mocked and attacked Chinese intellectuals; and Wang Shuo took an anti-intellectual stance and became the fiercest critic of Chinese intellectuals in contemporary China. Huazhi Wang concludes that Wang Shuo questions official nationalist ideology and explores the issue of national identity through rethinking the relationship between the nation and the self; Wang Shuo problematizes the nation by decoding the constitution of mainstream nationalist discourses. Huazhi Wang's intention is apparently to demonstrate how Wang Shuo's generation have reconstructed their national identity in an era when communist ideological power is waning. The Wang Shuo phenomenon is considered a clear expression of Wang Shuo's role as a transmitter of the socialist revolution. In his analysis of the novel *Please Don't Call Me Human*²³ in Chapter II, Huazhi Wang sees sports nationalism and national castration as both manifestations and criticisms. In Chapter III, Wang Anyi's works are analyzed, as an outstanding contemporary of

²² Wang, Huazhi. PhD. Dissertation, *Problematizing the Nation: The 'Wang Shuo Phenomenon' and Contemporary Chinese Culture*, UMI Company, United State, (University of Cornell, 1999)

²³ Wang Shuo, *Qianwan bie ba wo dang ren* 千万别把我当人 (Please Don't Call Me Human), *Zhongshan* 钟山 (Zhongshan), 1989, No. 7. English version *Please Don't Call Me Human*, Goldblatt, Howard (trans.), Harpenden: No Exit Press, 2000

Wang Shuo, but one who focused on 'family history fiction' in contrast with Wang Shuo.

Yibing Huang's PhD thesis is entitled *From "Orphans" to "Bastards": The Legacy of the Cultural Revolution and Contemporary Chinese Allegories of the Individual*²⁴ (2001). Huang offers critiques of two writers and one poet: Wang Shuo, Zhang Chengzhi and Duoduo. He rethinks the Cultural Revolution and contemporary China through the eyes of these three writers. In Chapter Three, which focuses on Wang Shuo, Huang considers him only as a novelist, not as an editor of TV dramas and movies; he admits that as a result his review of Wang Shuo is not a comprehensive one. He has selected Wang Shuo's more autobiographical works as the focus of his research, concentrating on portrayals of 'hooligans' in the process of development over the last twenty years in China. The chapter contains four sections, analyzing five of Wang Shuo's stories: "Air Hostess", "Rubber Man", "The Operators", *Playing for Thrills* and "Wild Animals"²⁵. Huang's conclusion is that Wang Shuo's later works tend towards the sentimental and nostalgic, and that his successful portrayals of capitalism in contemporary China include a major element of nostalgia for its socialist origins.

²⁴ Huang, Yibing. PhD Dissertation, *From "Orphans" to "Bastards": The Legacy of the Cultural Revolution and Contemporary Chinese Allegories of the Individual*, UMI Company, United State, 2001 (University of California, Los Angeles, 2001)

²⁵ Wang Shuo, 'Kongzhong xiaojie' 空中小姐 (Air Hostess), *Dangdai* 当代 (Dangdai), 1984, No. 2; 'Xiangpi ren' 橡皮人 (Rubber Man), *Qingnian wenxue* 青年文学 (Youth Literature), 1986, No. 11&12; 'Wan zhu' 顽主 (The Operators), *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest), 1987, No. 6; *Wan de jiu shi xintiao* 玩的就是心跳 (Playing for Thrills), *Wenxue siji* 文学四季 (Literary seasons), 1988, pp. 174-255. English version *Playing for Thrills*, Goldblatt, Howard (trans.), England: No Exit Press, 1997; 'Dongwu xiongmen' 动物凶猛 (Wild Animals), *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest), 1991, No. 6

Ping Chou's PhD thesis is entitled *Halfway Rebel: Rise and Fall of Wang Shuo's 'Hooligan Literature' Between 1978 and 1999*²⁶ (2002). In three chapters nearly twenty of Wang Shuo's stories are commented and analyzed one by one chronologically, with a similar amount of comment for each work. The three main aspects he examines are: the 'Gray Zone', social issues and satire, and gestures of reconciliation with tradition. In contrast with other scholars, Ping Chou also examines Wang Shuo's detective stories, regarding them as a part of his oeuvre that should not be ignored. In his analysis of Wang Shuo's "I am Your Dad"²⁷, Ping Chou discusses the failure of the attempt to bring democratic reform to the relationship between father and son, relating this to the similar pattern of failure of democratic reform in politics. He also criticizes Wang Shuo for not attempting to diagnose the source of the problems.

Geremie Barmé is a leading Western researcher on contemporary Chinese culture. He has published a number of books and articles including: 'Wang Shuo and Liumang ('Hooligan') Culture'²⁸ in 1992, and a book *New Ghosts, Old Dreams*²⁹ with co-editor Linda Jaivin, which contains comments on Wang Shuo's works. He also wrote a chapter 'The Apotheosis of the Liumang' in his latest book *In the Red*³⁰ in 1999. In this chapter, Barmé attempts to trace the basic elements of Wang Shuo's fiction back to earlier literary and cultural sources. He thinks that Wang Shuo is 'a playful writer of serious intent who availed himself of the contemporary Chinese cultural order to

²⁶ Chou, Ping. PhD Dissertation, *Halfway Rebel: Rise and Fall of Wang Shuo's "Hooligan Literature" Between 1978 and 1999*, UMI Company, United State, 2002 (University of Stanford, 2002)

²⁷ Wang Shuo, *Wo shi ni baba* 我是你爸爸 (I Am Your Dad), *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest), 1991, No. 2

²⁸ Barmé, Geremie. "Wang Shuo and Liumang ('Hooligan') Culture", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, Volume O, Issue 28 (July, 1992), pp.23-64

²⁹ Barmé, Geremie & Jaivin, Linda (eds.). *New Ghosts, Old Dreams*, New York: Times Books, 1992

³⁰ Barmé, Geremie. *In the Red*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999

depict a fictional world of great humour, perception, and release.’ He thinks that Wang Shuo’s works are not only examples of entertainment fiction and coded political writing but also a far more compelling form of art: a literature of escape and sublimation.

In his latest research, Barmé starts with an explanation of the word ‘liumang’ (hooligan) to explain the background to ‘liumang culture’. He examines Wang Shuo’s life looking for the source of the liumang-type characters who appear in his fiction. Several pieces of Wang Shuo’s fiction have been criticized focusing on ‘liumang, pizi and wanzhu’, ‘superfluous people, knights-errant and liumang’ and ‘the marriage of liumang and gemen’r’. Barmé introduces comments from some critics on Wang Shuo, including Zuo Shula’s first report on Wang’s life, Dai Jinhua’s comments on Wang’s characters in *The Operators* as ‘new people’ and ‘contemporary heroes’, and Liu Xiaobo’s views on his ‘superfluous people’ and ‘hippy art’, etc. Geremie Barmé’s intention is to look beyond the superficial humour and limited political subversiveness, and the more simplistic and obvious issues of youth alienation and emotional confusion in Wang Shuo’s stories. He tries rather to identify persistent elements of popular cultural mythology and demonstrate how they are refracted in the work of Wang Shuo, as one of China’s most versatile contemporary writers.

Sheryl WuDunn published a report³¹ on Wang Shuo in the *New York Times Review of Books* in 1993. She thinks that Wang Shuo, rather than criticizing the government for being autocratic, is mocking them for being uncool, which is far more devastating. She takes the view that although Wang Shuo does not espouse any political cause he

³¹ WuDunn, Sheryl. ‘The Word From China’s Kerouac: The Communists Are Uncool’, *The New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 10, 1993, p.3 & p.23

is far more subversive than political dissidents such as Su Xiaokang and Liu Binyan who live in America. In her book *China Wakes*³² (1994), co-written with Nicholas Kristof, Sheryl WuDunn repeats this view and points out that Wang Shuo is hugely ambitious for fame and fortune, and has a Madonna-like talent for marketing.

Jing Wang discusses Wang Shuo in one chapter in her book *High Culture Fever*³³ published in 1996. She comments that Wang Shuo's is the first example of a 'marketized' literature that promotes 'bestseller consciousness' above all else. Wang Shuo is distinct from the experimentalists of 1980s in his conscious dedication to the entertainment and commodity value of storytelling. She thinks that the 'Wang Shuo phenomenon' owes its manifestation to public opinion. Jing Wang points out that the progressive atrophy of the cultural and political influence of intellectuals has come to dominate popular culture on the glistening screen of the post-New Era, and she thanks Wang Shuo for his contribution in turning the negative image of highbrow people into a profitable industry.

Claire Huot's book *China's New Culture Scene*³⁴ (2000) focuses on Wang Shuo in Chapter II 'Away from Literature I: Words Turned On', which studies literary works in transition. She examines how Wang Shuo and his partners, especially film and TV drama director Feng Xiaogang and actor turned director Jiang Wen, have literally 'turned on' words, adapted Wang Shuo's stories into films and TV dramas. She

³² Kristof, Nicholas D. & WuDunn, Sheryl. 'A Room of One's Own', in *China Wakes*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing Limited, 1994, pp.276-304

³³ Wang, Jing. *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics and Ideology in Deng's China*. Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1996

³⁴ Huot, Claire. *China's New Cultural Scene*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000

includes the TV serials *Stories of the Editorial Office*³⁵ (1991) and *A Beijinger in New York*³⁶ and the film *In the Heat of the Sun*³⁷ (1995). Claire Huot comments that the key to Wang Shuo's popularity and financial success is his 'invented lingo', a combination of subverted political formulae with streetwise slang, which is always geared to a light-hearted effect.

Xueping Zhong criticizes Wang Shuo's anti-hero treatment in his book *Masculinity Besieged*³⁸ (2000). He categorizes the reception of Wang Shuo's works as having three aspects. First, Wang Shuo's witty parody of official discourse delights many of his readers, especially in some of his earlier stories. Second, the kinds of characters Wang Shuo brings to life in his stories, the hooligans and 'dregs of society', have been applauded by critics. Third, the kind of hero found in Wang Shuo's fiction has been created by the way that when he makes fun of the sublime, the elite and the sentimental; the 'badness' has been done in the name of 'goodness'. Xueping Zhong argues that the issue is not as simple as the privileged social position of Wang Shuo's antiheroes; his concern is that the depiction of the privileged rebel with masculinist overtones captures the imagination of the intellectuals. Xueping Zhong thinks that Wang Shuo's stories have released the pent-up anger of ordinary people toward the absurdity of the power system. The success of these stories signifies the establishment of a new aesthetic order where the once heroic image of men is replaced by anti-heroes. As these new images of men move away from orthodox official Chinese

³⁵ *Bianjibu de gushi* 编辑部的故事 (Stories from the Editorial Office), directed by Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙 & Zhao Baogang 赵宝刚, edited by Wang Shuo 王朔 & Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚, 1991

³⁶ A TV drama produced by Wang Shuo and Feng Xiaogang's Haomeng Film and Television Company, directed by Feng Xiaogang, Jiang Wen was the actor, 1993

³⁷ *Yangguang canlan de rizi* 阳光灿烂的日子 (In the Heat of the Sun), based on Dongwu xiongmeng 动物凶猛 (Wild Animals), directed and edited by Xiang Wen 姜文, Beijing Film Studio, 1995

³⁸ Zhong, Xueping. 'Wang Shuo's Antiheroes: The Third Case and the Politics of (Male) Marginality', *Masculinity Besieged*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000, pp.109-118.

ideology into the murky realms of 'human nature', this will have political implications.

The Background to New Era Literature

Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' in 1942 dominated China's cultural development for half a century. Mao advocated that literature and art should 'serve the workers, peasants and soldiers', with the main aim of acting as a propaganda tool to unite the masses in the war with the Japanese and the KMT. This propaganda was very effective in helping overthrow the old regime; however to have real, lasting impact what was needed was literature and art owned by the people, in a form and language accessible to the people. Zhao Shuli's 赵树理 works were held up as models in these respects.

At the same time, the CCP was severely critical of people who did not obey policy; this criticism was institutionalized in the rectification movements 整风运动 which took place at Yan'an and later. The works of intellectuals who adopted a purist approach based on aesthetic criteria were criticized for their lack of political awareness and for spreading bourgeois ideas.

Mao's talks at Yan'an over time took on the status of absolute authority, and became part of the state control apparatus. The call to 'serve the people' was perverted into manipulation and control of the people. After the death of Mao and the overthrow of the Gang of Four, 'Scar Literature' and 'Root-seeking Literature' were encouraged by the new authorities to validate their authority by criticising and exposing the

privations the people suffered under the old regime. In the mid-1980s, 'avant-garde' literature and art appeared in China; these tended to take literature and art down a narrow road which served a minority of intellectuals. Folk culture and popular literary and artistic works were now looked down upon.

Young Rebels

Wang Shuo took different path, producing fiction, film and TV scripts with mass appeal, which paradoxically reaffirmed traditional values and yet were often deeply subversive in their attitude to political authority and ideology. He was a leading figure in the process to develop a commercial society. Yet he started from his own needs rather than consciously rebelling. Wang Shuo, and the young people he portrayed in novels such as *Playing for Thrills*, the so-called 'pizi' (hooligans), were society's rebels. As the Birmingham School³⁹ revealed in research on rebellious youth in Britain in the 1960s, the pizi had a positive effect on a society stubbornly resistant to change.

Birmingham School theories were introduced into China in the 1990s. They marked a change in the conservative attitude to mass culture of the Frankfurt School.⁴⁰ They positively evaluated the sub-culture of the post-war youth generation, focusing on working class young people, such as Teddy boys, Mods, Skinheads and hippies. They concluded that these young people's lives were not decadent or morally degenerate. On the contrary, they were using their own way to criticize society; their way of life

³⁹ The Birmingham School was founded at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham.

⁴⁰ The Frankfurt School is named after the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt.

was a way of resistance. They felt oppressed by orthodox culture and were struggling against this dominant ideology, not simply engaging in random destruction.

Their situation was very much like the young generation in China after the Cultural Revolution, where people felt deceived by the constant political movements, and did not want to be manipulated by those in power as the older generation had been. The ruling ideology had lost its legitimacy in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Some young people wanted to oppose a politicised society. These included Wei Jingsheng 魏京生 and Bei Dao 北岛, who used political articles and poetry to criticize the authorities; some, for example Cui Jian 崔健, used rock and roll music and lyrics to rebel against society, very much like the Rockers; and some, like Wang Shuo, mocked the official language of ideology. Young people in Britain and young people in China were both rebelling against the dominant ideology in their own ways. 'Culture is not a way of life, it is a way of struggle.'⁴¹

The Birmingham School positively evaluated the role of mass culture. They advocated research on popular culture, and tried to break down the barriers between canonized art (high art) works and popular works. Wang Shuo is an example of a person who bridged this divide. Wang Shuo did not consciously set out to be a rebel; he adopted the role of a common man pursuing his own financial gain. At the same time his works contain serious criticisms, which constantly alarmed the authorities. Wang was part of the first wave of cultural privatization, a change-over from the state planning economic system to a market oriented system in the cultural sphere analogous to that in the industrial world. He helped stimulate the mass market for

⁴¹ Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Post-war Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origin of Cultural Study*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, p.102

commercial cultural products for ordinary people, something which marked the beginning of a new mass culture in China.

Mass Culture

Chinese mass culture, like the economy in general, attempted to develop a new way with Chinese characteristics. The cultural world went from pursuing pure art or 'high art' in the 1980s to mass culture and a 'culture industry' in the 1990s. People rejected as hypocritical the traditional ideal of a 'perfect, beautiful and intelligent high culture'⁴² in favour of a 'culture is ordinary'⁴³ version. The emergence of mass culture was a sign of the end of politicised culture as a vehicle for control and as a propaganda tool. The majority of cultural products were now being made purely for market profit and for entertainment; one authority estimated that 70% of films were now pure entertainment, commercial films with no 'mainstream' propaganda message.⁴⁴ Although mainstream culture products still occupy a position of 'hegemony', nevertheless they have much less control and influence over ordinary people.

Pursuing mass culture in China has had the positive effect of tearing off the mask of hypocrisy and satisfying the tastes of ordinary people, using entertainment and enjoyment to oppose the old society's ideology and its idols. The weapons of this mass culture have been comedy and mockery. Wang Shuo uses his own outrageous behaviour and pronouncements as a strategy to stimulate the market, publicising his

⁴² Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, Cambridge: University Press, 1935

⁴³ Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. Edited by Robin Gable London: Verso, 1989

⁴⁴ Ni Zhen 倪震, *Gaige yu Zhongguo dianying* 改革与中国电影 (Reform and Chinese Film), p.17

values, and inviting others to follow him. Personal achievement has started to be judged by financial rather than political status.

The theories of Frankfurt School were introduced into China in the 1980s. The classic work of the Frankfurt School, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, was translated into Chinese in 1990.⁴⁵ Chinese academics drew lessons from Western theory to explain new phenomena in China, and adopted the language of Western theory to analyse Chinese reality. For example, they popularised the terms 'mass culture' or 'popular culture' (dazhong wenhua 大众文化) and 'culture industry' (wenhua gongye 文化工业). These, together with the concepts of subculture and post-modernism, have been used to analyse the new cultural phenomena, including the 'Wang Shuo phenomenon'.

A leading figure of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno, criticized mass culture since the 1940s. He condemned mass culture in capitalist societies for manipulating and controlling people by catering to poor taste, and providing an escapist answer to the problems of the real world.

'The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu.'⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, Hong Peiyu 洪佩郁 & Lin Yuefeng 蔺月峰 (trans.), *Qimeng bianzhengfa* 启蒙的辩证法 (Dialectic of Enlightenment), Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1990

⁴⁶ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming (trans.), New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, p.139

He criticized the depressing effect of mass culture on people, as it emerged in the form of a monopoly culture industry. Adorno's ideas were a seminal contribution to understanding of the subject, but in China the situation of mass culture is totally different to Adorno's Europe. Mass culture in China had been banished for thirty years from 1949 to 1979, but, emerging from its repression by 'mainstream' (i.e. state sponsored) culture and elite culture, it re-appeared from the 1980s onwards. Mainstream culture had enjoyed the powerful backing of the authorities, and had hegemony over other forms of culture. In the 1980s, elite culture was fighting for freedom of expression and the right to exist; meantime mass culture was being boosted by the market economy and the open door policy, both of which allowed it to thrive. Mass culture was able to withstand the various forces repressing it, and now occupied the main cultural market. However, it did suffer from the defects described by Adorno.

China commercialised rapidly in the 1990s; capitalist principles operated throughout society, with many resultant defects; for example, profiteering producing poor quality products. This commercialisation was encouraged by the authorities; one reason was in order to develop the economy, but another was the transfer of people's attention from politics to personal enjoyment. Mass culture was used to create a 'false consciousness' and 'false needs'; the majority of people were lulled into a sense of satisfaction by new material and cultural products; they felt happy with their current living situation and forgot their political aspirations. The Frankfurt School's theory that the 'mass culture industry' had taken over from religion as Marx's 'opiate of the masses', the means used by those in power to blunt opposition to their rule, struck a chord with Chinese academics.

The aim of the culture industry is to make consumers feel satisfied; entertainment creates a feeling of well-being which stops people thinking deeply about serious issues. These cultural products provide people with temporary release from their various anxieties, but do not change the fundamentals. The feeling of satisfaction means they can forget about current difficulties, and temporarily escape from reality, so no thoughts of resistance remain.⁴⁷

Mass culture not only acts as a 'cultural drug' manipulating the masses, at the same time it also seeks to avoid revealing its own shortcomings. These include dumbing down to the lowest mass taste, and catering for people's prejudices rather than enlightening them. The more enlightened people can recognize the fake optimism of the entertainment industry. The Frankfurt School is highly critical of these aspects of the culture industry, but recognizes that even so people cannot totally be manipulated by the mass culture industry.⁴⁸

Making the biggest profit in the shortest time is the principal aim, with short-sighted self-interest dominating the thoughts of many producers of cultural products. Formulaic mass culture products have acted as a 'cultural drug' for the masses for the last ten years. It is not coincidental that this has occurred at a time of radical economic reform, with the whole of society increasingly being run according to commercial principles, with many medium and small state-owned factories being closed down, and millions of people losing their jobs. Give the severe inadequacies of the welfare system, many people face a real struggle to survive, and millions of peasants have

⁴⁷ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming (trans.), New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, p.144

⁴⁸ Adorno, Theodor W., 'Free Time', *The Culture Industry*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 162-170

flocked into the cities to act as cheap unskilled labour. Crime has greatly increased too, giving people a sense of insecurity. The 'low level cultural' products are not able to distract people to the extent intended.

The above are some of the criticisms of new mass culture products. Mass culture producers tend not to pay attention to academic research, which they see as out of touch with reality; the academics feel justified but marginalized. This is an issue of economics versus artistic standards with no definitive solution.

Commercialization of Culture and China

Commercialization refers to the process by which culture has been made into a commodity to be purchased by individual consumers. In the past culture was largely supported by patrons; in the traditional West these included the church, the court and the aristocracy. Ordinary people also created their own limited folk culture of music and dance and material objects for their own use. In modern socialist societies the state has provided subsidised culture as part of an educational, or propaganda, service. Capitalist societies still provide some subsidies for 'high culture' through government or company support. Universally in the industrialised world increases in leisure time and income, added to changes in delivery technology in the form of film, radio, TV, records, videos, CDs and DVDs, have allowed the development of a commercial mass culture. In this the consumers pay the cost and hence largely determine the content of their mass culture. This has led to accusations of manipulation and 'dumbing down' but the fact is that ordinary people have greatly enhanced leisure opportunities, in both amount and range, compared to the past.

There were almost no commercial cultural products in mainland China under the socialist system. After 1978, economic reforms, the open door policy and the promotion new ways of thinking all made possible the process of creating cultural products for financial gain. As economic development replaced political movements as the focal point for national construction, the financial income from cultural products became increasingly essential for literary and artistic workers used to a state subsidized system. Although official policy on cultural products remained based on Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' in 1942, nevertheless raising people's living standards and enriching people's daily lives were increasingly emphasized. Cultural products relating to different aspects of life were encouraged. Western academics, such as Beverley Hooper, have done research on consumption and consumerism, focusing on the development of consumerist markets in Chinese and Western domestic products in China over the past twenty years. These reflect the changes in people's aspirations and consumerist physiology. My research focuses on the change in attitude towards cultural products, the commoditization of products which had been unilaterally defined by the elite for the masses, and now had to take into consideration consumer preference.

This involved a change-over from a state-funded cultural products production and distribution system to a market-orientated profit-motivated production and distribution system. By comparing the differences between cultural products before and after the economic reforms in contemporary China it is possible to demonstrate the great changes in the cultural field, especially in social values, in the guiding principles of the production, remuneration and payments systems, in attitudes to Hong

Kong, Taiwanese and Western cultural products, and in the ability to determine popular cultural and social trends.

Until the mid-1980s, the literary and artistic world in mainland China was still very much focused on making books, films, TV serials and songs, etc. with social and political significance. Literature was at the forefront of the introspection process for ordinary people trying to make sense of their turbulence lives over the past thirty years since the founding of the People's Republic of China. A group of writers with influential works emerged after the shift in government policy at the end of the 1970s; these included Lu Xinhua 卢新华 and his story *Shanghen* 伤痕 (Scar), Liu Xinwu and his story *Banzhuren* 班主任 (The Class Teacher), Zhang Jie and her story *Ai shi bu neng wangji de* 爱是不能忘记的 (Love Cannot Be Forgotten).

Following these literary trends, the film world adapted 'Scar Literature', 'Root-seeking Literature', and 'Reform Literature' into films. The official distribution system for 'mainstream' films was filled with works adapted from such stories; there was, for example, *Mumaren* 牧马人 (Shepherd),⁴⁹ *Tianyunshan chuanqi* 天云山传奇 (The Legacy of Tianyun Mountain),⁵⁰ *Bei aiqing yiwang de jiaoluo* 被爱情遗忘的角落 (The Corner Forgotten by Love).⁵¹

⁴⁹ Adapted from Zhang Xianliang's 张贤亮 story *Ling yu rou* 灵与肉 (Soul and Flesh), 1980.

⁵⁰ Adapted from Lu Yanzhou's 鲁彦周 story *Tianyunshan chuanqi* 天云山传奇 (The Legacy of Tianyun Mountain), 1979.

⁵¹ Adapted from Zhang Xuan's 张炫 story *Bei aiqing yiwang de jiaoluo* 被爱情遗忘的角落 (The Corner Forgotten by Love), 1979.

TV serials adopted the literary trends of that time as well, with such examples as *Cuotuosuiyue* 蹉跎岁月 (Time Passes by and Nothing is Accomplished).⁵² Apart from these, traditional Chinese literary works became a resource for TV serial making; for example there were the TV serials *Hongloumeng* 红楼梦 (Dream of the Red Chamber) and *Xiyouji* 西游记 (Journey to the West), both state-funded blockbuster TV serials. Although these TV serials were very popular, they presented certain difficulties. They were technically and financially very taxing, and the original literary works had to be outstanding, as did the directors, editors and actors, in order to produce an acceptable product.

These books, films and TV serials had an enormous impact on society, while people in the literary world were looking for new trends. Young writers moved on to experimental works, such as Xu Xing's 徐星 'Wu zhuti bianzou' 无主题变奏 (Variations Without A Theme, 1985), and Liu Suola's 刘索拉, 'Ni bie wu xuanze' 你别无选择 (You Have No Other Choice, 1985), which were considered avant-garde stories. There were also new trends reflecting Western inspiration: 'Xin xianshi zhuyi' (new realism), 'Xin lishi zhuyi' (new historicism) and 'hou xiandaizhuyi' (post-modernism), etc. These new trends were rather difficult to understand and many readers lost interest. The distribution system for films changed from a work-unit administered system (work units brought and distributed the vast majority of film-viewing tickets for their employees as part of their education and propaganda programmes) to a pure market system. This caused a dramatic fall in audiences. While

⁵² Adapted from Ye Xin's 叶辛 story *Cuotuosuiyue* 蹉跎岁月 (Time Passes by and Nothing is Accomplished), 1982

the development of the new trend left mainland producers at a loss, the cultural market was filled by entertainment products from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Since the open door policy of 1978, books, audio and video tapes had been brought from Hong Kong to the mainland by traders and sold in the market. This was similar to the smuggling of electrical goods, such as TV sets and tape recorders, etc. Some of these items were legal and some of them were illegal. Ordinary people suddenly had the choice of doing business for a living, running a shop or selling goods in the market, instead of working for a work unit. This situation reflected the changes in economic policy, resulting in commercial cultural products becoming available in the market and spreading throughout the country via non-official distribution channels.

Typical cultural products in this early 1980s market included Teresa Teng's (Deng Lijun) popular songs, Chiong Yao's (Qiong Yao) love stories, Jin Yong's martial art novels and Jackie Chan's (Cheng Long) martial art films. Because these initial products were so popular and brought financial success, there were more and more books, films and songs coming into mainland China from Hong Kong and Taiwan. They included San Mao's 三毛 travel stories, Yi Shu's 亦舒 love stories, Liang Yusheng's 梁羽生 and Gu long's 古龙 martial arts fiction, popular songs by singers such as Liu Wenzheng 刘文正, Zhang Mingmin 张明敏, Qi Qin 齐秦, Wang Mingquan 汪明荃, Zhang Xueyou 张学友 and Ye Qianwen 叶倩文, etc. Taiwanese films based on Chiong Yao's love stories, such as *Yaner zai linshao* 雁儿在林梢 (Wild Goose on the Top of the Tree), *Caixia mantian* 彩霞满天 (Rosy Clouds All over the Sky), starred Brigitte Lin 林青霞 and Qin Han 秦汉. Hong Kong films

starring Chow Yun-Fat 周润发 included *Yingxiong bense* 英雄本色 (True Qualities of A Hero) and *Zushen* 赌神 (God of Gambling). The Hong Kong TV serials *Shanghai tan* 上海滩 (Shanghai Beach) and the martial arts TV serials *She diao yingxiong zhuan* 射雕英雄传 (The Hero who Shot the Vulture)⁵³ and *Chen Zhen* 陈⁵⁴ were all very popular. A huge number of these books, films, TV serials and songs flooded into the market one after another. They are stereotypical products of the commercial entertainment industry, which can be constantly churned out at low cost and in a short period. It was found that there was a good market for these consumer cultural products. These were something that mainland Chinese writers and film producers had never experienced before.

Taiwan had no direct contact with mainland China in early 1980s; all the cultural products made in Taiwan went through Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong had a developed economy and had become a leading world financial centre in Asia, Hong Kong was commonly criticized as a 'cultural desert' (*wenhua shamo* 文化沙漠) by mainland intellectuals, and people in Hong Kong were famous only for their pursuit of money. During the past twenty years, as these popular cultural products flooded into the mainland from Hong Kong, people began to re-evaluate their views on Hong Kong, which now became a model for imitation by mainlanders.

In the book market, apart from martial arts fiction and love stories, books on life skills, such as hair dressing, clothes-making and knitwear knitting have become more popular than books following the official line, so-called 'serious literature' (*yansu*

⁵³ TV serial adapted from Jin Yong's martial arts fiction.

⁵⁴ Fictional account of the martial arts hero Chen Zhen based in the 1920s & 1930s.

wenxue 严肃文学). Books are expected to reflect more ordinary people's life experiences and have moved away from their focus on national and group interests to individuals. Readers and audiences are for the first time treated as customers who need to be satisfied in order to make a profit. The income from selling stories in the market has made it possible for writers like Wang Shuo to make a living as a freelance writer without receiving any salary from a state-owned work unit. This was unthinkable twenty years ago. Wang Shuo was the pioneer in this, becoming the first major financial success and a model for other writers. Publishers can no longer rely on the government for this main source of income; they have to work together with writers to create and stimulate markets. New works, new phrases and new trends must be constantly generated, backed up by a whole panoply of marketing and advertising to attract audiences.

Most mainland films produced in the twenty years after the PRC was founded were about wars, heroes, and contributing to the constructing the socialist motherland. The first ever entertainment films made by a mainland film director were the martial arts films made by Zhang Huaxun *Shenmi de dafo* 神秘的大佛 (Mysterious Buddha, 1980) and *Wulin zhi* 武林志 (The Chronicles of the Martial Fraternity, 1983)⁵⁵. These films were severely criticized for being in poor taste and putting box office success first, and Zhang Huaxun gave up making entertainment films altogether for a time. However it was because of the box office success of these films, when most film studios found themselves on the edge of bankruptcy as they facing the withdrawal of

⁵⁵ See Chapter III Wang Shuo and Contemporary Chinese Films and Popular TV Serials: Entertainment Films

financial support from state, that studios finally chose the entertainment film road.⁵⁶ Four 'Wang Shuo films'⁵⁷ were released in 1988, a year that was a milestone in entertainment film making in mainland China. In TV serial production, the low-cost indoor drama *Kewang* 渴望 (Yearning, 1990) became the biggest hit in Chinese television history, with Wang Shuo contributing as co-editor. The mainland also started creating its own pop music, with the first teenage pop singer Cheng Lin 程林 appearing in the mid-1980s, and the first rock and roll singer and song writer, Cui Jian 崔建 influencing both the young generation and the music industry.

The attitude towards western cultural products changed dramatically from 'banning, being disgusted, criticizing, and rejecting' to 'pursuing, imitating, blind worshipping and advocating'. Cultural exchange with foreign countries was originally limited to the circle of socialism countries, resulting in the importation of products such as the Soviet Union's book-based film *Zheli de liming jing qiaoqiao* 这里的黎明静悄悄 (The Quiet Dawn), and the song *Mosike jiaowai de wan shang* 莫斯科郊外的晚上 (Evening in a Moscow Suburb). These kinds of cultural products were the main sources of inspiration from abroad from the end of 1940s to 1970s and influenced several generations. They were part of the mainstream culture for official socialist education and propaganda rather than making a profit.

Cultural products from America, Britain and around the world gradually spread into the market through the relaxation of official censorship controls. These included

⁵⁶ Ni Zhen 倪震, *Gaige yu Zhongguo dianying* 改革与中国电影 (Reform and Chinese Film), Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1994, pp154-164

⁵⁷ See Chapter III Wang Shuo and Contemporary Chinese Films and Popular TV Serials: Making Wang Shuo's Early Films

influential Hollywood films such as *Piliwu* 霹雳舞 (Break Dance), the popular British detective fiction *Fuermosi zhentan ji* 福尔摩斯侦探集 (Sherlock Holmes Collection) by Conan Dolye, the French *Jidushan bojue* 基督山伯爵 (Count of Monte Cristo) by Alexandre Dumas, the science fiction *Haidi liang wan li* 海底两万里 (Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea) by Jules Verne, and the Japanese film *Juechang* 绝唱 (Zessho) starring Yamaguchi Momoe 山口百惠. Making financial profits was the main aim of these popular cultural products in 1980s, at time that was the very beginning of the introduction of Western popular cultural products into the PRC. The 'bourgeois' life-styles, fashions and interests were quickly picked up by young people, transforming their notion of the ideal life. Western values, the pursuit of individual interests, the identification of the self and a spirit of adventure, started to become integrated into contemporary Chinese culture.

The process of commercialization was a turbulent one, full of conflicts and arguments. Most of these new products were criticized strongly at the beginning: Teresa Teng's songs were labelled 'pornographic' and criticized as 'decadent bourgeois music' (*zichanjieji de mimi zhi yin* 资产阶级的靡靡之音). This also applied to martial arts films which were initially condemned. Twenty years later, after the martial arts film *Wohucanglong* 卧虎藏龙 (Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon) directed by Ang Lee won an Oscar in 2001, following great success in the West, martial arts films became the new vogue in China. Influential art film directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, achieved their biggest market successes with Zhang's *Yingxiong* 英雄 (Hero, 2002) and *Shimianmaifu* 十面埋伏 (House of Flying Daggers, 2004), and Chen's *Wuji* 无极 (The Promise, 2005).

Commercialization has resulted in richer and more varied cultural products to cater for the mass market. However, this economic liberalization does not extend to content where it impinges on political issues; this is still strictly controlled by the government with little change brought by the process of commercialization of culture.

The Debate on Humanism

Wang Shuo's success sparked off a debate on his works in the early 1990s. This took stock of the changes in Chinese cultural development over the previous decade, as opposing groups tried to offer their analyses. Concern focused on the question of commercialisation in the cultural sphere and the deleterious effect this was having on society.

In January 1993, Wang Shuo, a 'hooligan' writer, was voted number four in the top ten most popular people of 1992 by *Beijing Youth* readers.⁵⁸ *China Youth* then started a column headed 'What has Wang Shuo brought to us?' (王朔给我们带来了什么?) on January 30, 1993. This allowed ordinary readers, not just professional critics, to express freely their views on Wang Shuo. Wang Shuo was already a very influential figure among ordinary people in society.

The Debate on Humanism 人文精神讨论 started mainly as a criticism of the 'Wang Shuo phenomenon'. There were two sides: the 'love Wang Shuo' faction and the 'hate

⁵⁸ Donghui Li, *The 'Phenomenon' of Wang Shuo: A Historico-Literary Consideration*, United State: UMI company, p.3

Wang Shuo' faction divided between the Beijing and Shanghai literary fields, the northern and southern cultural centres.

Wang Shuo was a prolific writer between 1986-1991; he was the best selling writer in China, selling nearly 10 million copies in the early 1990s, and over a dozen of his stories were adapted into hit TV serials and films. In the mid-1980s, Wang Shuo was almost the first person in the literary world of the PRC to pay serious attention to the demands of the market.⁵⁹

Wang Shuo has been called the 'bad' boy of the contemporary Chinese cultural field; with his rebellious image he is often described as a 'hooligan' or 'riffraff'. He portrays hooligans apparently based on himself as a model; and he brought the Beatnik to China. Wang Shuo's philosophy as a writer is:

'I've never written anything because I thought it was necessary for society. In fact, my biggest purpose is to be different from them. If they're highbrow, I'm low. If they're serious, then I'm not.'⁶⁰

Wang Shuo's works contain strongly subversive satire on current political phenomena; although he is not a dissident, in the sense that he does not launch direct political attacks on the party, in mocking the Communist authorities as uncool he is even more dangerous than the overt dissidents.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Zhang Zhizhong 张志忠, 'Wang Shuo xianxiang: lubiao yu tianping' 王朔现象: 路标与天平 (The Wang Shuo Phenomenon: Road Signs And Balance), *Wenyi pinglun* 文艺评论 (Literature and Art Criticism), 1997, vol. 5, pp.49-58

⁶⁰ Yu Wong, 'Wang's World', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 8, 1996, pp.46-48

⁶¹ Sheryl WuDunn, 'The Word From China's Kerouac: The Communists Are Uncool', *The New York Times Book Review*, 10 Jan. 1993, p.3 & p.23

Wang Shuo persists in his ways no matter what others say; he is obsessed with fame and wealth in a way entirely familiar to Western readers of lifestyle magazines, but highly controversial in China. His is said to have demonstrated 'a Madonna-style talent for marketing'⁶² and to be 'the most conscious story-producing businessman.'⁶³

Many concepts have been used by Chinese critics to comment on Wang Shuo, such as 'new realism' 新现实, 'new situation' 新写实, and 'new urban people' 新市民, etc. but there is always great divergence of opinion on how to understand Wang Shuo. He remains a very controversial figure.

The market economy developed very quickly in the early 1990s, and popular literary products filled the market, whilst serious literature lost a huge proportion of its readership. Some writers started writing 'vulgar' stories, and some writers set up companies and become businessmen. These latter included Lu Wenfu 陆文夫, Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮, Wei Minglun 魏明伦.⁶⁴ Scholars with very orthodox opinions found this hard to accept and criticized the trend. In 1993, Wang Xiaoming 王晓明 and several scholars published an article 'Kuangye shang de feixu—wenxue he renwen jingshen de weiji' 旷野上的废墟—文学和人文精神的危机 (Ruins in the Wilderness—The Crisis in Literature and Humanism).⁶⁵ The debate on 'humanism'

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Ye Peng 叶鹏, 'Bu lin e ming' 不吝恶名 (Do not afraid of Bad Name). Liang Huan 梁欢 (ed.), *Mingren yan zhong de Wang Shuo* 名人眼中的王朔 (Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes), Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1993, p.66 (中国最自觉的小说制作商)

⁶⁴ Lu Wenfu 陆文夫 became chairman of Suzhou Hong wen gongsi 苏州弘文公司, Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮 set up Ningxia Xianhai shiye gongsi 宁夏先海实业公司, Wei Minglun 魏明伦 set up Wei Minglun Jingji wenhua gongsi 魏明伦经济文化公司 in early 1990s. Lin Dazhong 林大中 & Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 (ed.), *Jiushi niandai wencun* 九十年代文存 (Collected Works of the 1990s), Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001, pp.42-43

⁶⁵ Lin Dazhong 林大中 & Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 (ed.), *Collected Works of the 1990s*, pp.27-41, originally published in *Shanghai wenxue* 上海文学 (Shanghai Literature), 1993, vol. 6

started from this and lasted for more than two years. It was the biggest nationwide debate of the 1990s, exposing a wide split inside the intellectual world.⁶⁶

Wang Xiaoming's article criticized the 'vulgar' situation after serious literature lost its 'shock effect' 轰动效应⁶⁷ by the late 1980s. He said:

"The wave of 'commercialisation' with Chinese characteristics has almost pulled literature out by the roots and we suddenly find that the majority of people in society have long since lost interest in literature.'⁶⁸

In this discussion, Wang Shuo was criticised for pandering to public complaints about society, and believed to be describing the dregs of society in his stories. His detractors complained that people's cultural life was going steadily downhill.

'The crisis of literature actually explores the crisis of contemporary Chinese humanism. The whole of society is indifferent to literature, it has just proved from one aspect that we have already lost interest in developing our spiritual life.'⁶⁹

Wang Meng wrote articles arguing in favour of Wang Shuo, provoking criticism from many quarters. Wang Meng said:

'We probably never thought that it was possible to have another type of writer and literature.....To writers like us who have great responsibility for the heavens or themselves, he (Wang Shuo) is really a naughty

⁶⁶ Yang Zhijin 杨志今 & Liu Xinfeng 刘新风 (eds.), *Xinshiqi wentan fengyun lu* 新时期文坛风云录 (New Era Literary World's Storms), Changchun: Jilin chubanshe, 1999, p.471

⁶⁷ Wang Meng 王蒙, 'Wenxue: Shique hongdong xingying yihou' 文学: 失却轰动效应以后 (After Literature Lost Its Shock Effect), *Wang Meng Wenji* 王蒙文集 (Collected Works of Wang Meng), 1993, vol. 6, pp.337-344

⁶⁸ Cited in Lin Dazhong 林大中 & Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 (ed.), *Collected Works of the 1990s*, p.27

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p.28

boy.....He desperately evades the solemn, the sacred and the great; and he also avoids the things he thinks are tragic and sentimental.⁷⁰

Since then divergent opinions emerged, with Wang Meng and Wang Shuo in the group supporting writers who tried to enter the market economy. This group was known as the 'two Wangs' 二王. Zhang Chengzhi 张承志 and Zhang Wei 张炜 represented the group criticising writers for being influenced by the market economy; they were called the 'two Zhangs' 二张.

Wang Meng questioned how many people who criticize Wang Shuo really understood Wang Shuo. What Wang Shuo hated were 'false morality, false nobility and false attitudes.' Wang Meng thought that Wang Shuo was 'deliberately using the way of insulting people and literature as a safer way to express the truth of the emperor's new clothes.'⁷¹ He thinks the reason Wang Shuo 'blasphemes against the sacred' 亵渎崇高 is because 'initially it is life that blasphemes against the sacred,' and that China's political movements had time and again 'played' with people, hence so has Wang Shuo.⁷²

Wang Shuo thinks that people who call for humanism actually want to rebuild social morality, yet this may turn out to be the old and decadent morality of the 'feudal' past.

⁷⁰ Wang Meng 王蒙, 'Duobi chonggao' 躲避崇高 (Evading Nobility), Ding Dong 丁东, Sun Min 孙珉, ed. *Shiji zhijiao de chongzhuang—Wang Meng xianxiang zhengminglu* 世纪之交的冲撞—王蒙现象争鸣录 (The Collision of the Changing Centuries—Debate on the Wang Meng Phenomenon), Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 1996, pp.181-188

⁷¹ Lin Dazhong 林大中 & Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 (ed.), *Jiushi niandai wencun* 九十年代文存 (Collected Works of the 1990s), Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001, p.64

⁷² Wang Meng 王蒙, 'Evading Nobility', *The Collision of the Changing Centuries—Debate on the Wang Meng Phenomenon*, pp.181-188

This then would become a weapon to intimidate people; if it were this kind of humanism, he never wanted to see it.⁷³

Zhang Chengzhi 'using his pen as a banner' 以笔为旗 called for people to support him; he strongly criticised the degenerate literary world, saying:

'I don't admit these people are writers; they are essentially just people who pursue fame and financial gain. They cannot reject the temptation of money and fame; this is because they fundamentally do not have the wish and need to resist it.'⁷⁴

Zhang Wei attacks 'tolerance'; he thinks: 'they are talking about patience and compromise, and even publicly advocate joining in the dirty stream.' He proclaimed: 'I will absolutely not 'tolerate'. On the contrary I will learn from that great old man [Lu Xun]. 'Forgive no one'.⁷⁵

Zhang Chengzhi and Zhang Wei represented the 'rescue group' 拯救派 that believed intellectuals had lost their humanity in the face of money. They wanted to rescue those intellectuals who had lost 'face', and bring them back from decadent commercial literary work to purer and more moral cultural forms. Wang Meng and Wang Shuo represented the 'capitulationist' group 投降派. Wang Shuo was part of a number of young writers who mocked existing restraints and concepts of literature and history; they used 'hooligan' language to earn the right to debate with mainstream

⁷³ Lin Dazhong 林大中 & Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 (ed.), *Collected Works of the 1990s*, p.55

⁷⁴ Huang Xiuyi 黄修己 (ed.), *Ershi shiji Zhongguo wenxue shi* 20世纪中国文学史 (Twenty Century Chinese Literary History), Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 1998, p.181

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.181 (一个都不饶恕)

culture.⁷⁶ Many literary magazines and newspapers joined in the debate, such as *Dushu*, *Wenyi zhengming*, *Wenyi bao*, and *Guangming ribao*, etc. The debate involved widest possible circle of critics and scholars. The ‘rescue group’ based around Shanghai, included another two Wangs ‘er wang’ 二王, Wang Xiaoming 王晓明 and Wang Binbin 王彬彬 (who lives in Nanjing); the ‘capitulationists’ based in Beijing, included the ‘er wu’ 二武, Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 and Liu Xinwu 刘心武. Critics in Shanghai displayed a generally conservative attitude towards literature and art during the process of commercialisation; this reflected their commitment to elite culture, which looks down on the new commercialised mass culture. Their attitude appears regressive, but its value lies in the support it offers to elite culture. Critics in Beijing were more open-minded and pragmatic towards the commercialisation of culture. Liu Xinwu thinks the ‘two Zhangs’ are ‘rushing to impose their own ideals on others’, since Zhang Chengzhi had showed strong religious belief towards Islam, and Zhang Wei was criticised for including a kind of mysticism in his stories. Zhang Yiwu believed the ‘two Zhangs’ are representatives of ‘new theology’ 新神学,⁷⁷ which he compared to the ‘theology’ of the Cultural Revolution.

This debate was not without its problems. The concept of ‘humanism’ was not clear, everybody had their own definitions, and so many critics’ comments on the debate were compromised by their different understanding of the literary concepts. Although the debate lasted a long time, the results were not very satisfactory. The debate was,

⁷⁶ Wang Gan 王干, ‘Zhengjiu yu jiegou: shiji zhijiao de pengzhuang’ 拯救与解构: 世纪之交的碰撞 (Rescue and Deconstructionism: Collision at the Turn of the Century), *Xinhua wenzhai* 新华文摘 (Xinhua Abstract), 1995, vol.5, p.115

⁷⁷ Huang Xiuyi 黄修己 (ed.), *Twenty Century Chinese Literary History*, p.181

by proxy, a debate on the development of society and the market economy; ultimately, whether people liked it or not, the latter was an inevitable trend.

The arguments of the 'two Zhangs' group lacked understanding of the spiritual life of ordinary people; the 'humanism' they called for was empty, a superficially high-minded but in reality decadent and hypocritical spirit propagated for decades by Leftism. It aimed to set up moral standards by which to judge others, but such critics were criticized as intellectuals living in 'ivory towers' who did not worry about the needs of everyday life. Writers like Wang Shuo had to write to make a living; their critics failed to grasp the realities of life for those without an iron rice bowl.

It was a valuable debate, which cannot be judged simply by who won or lost. The trend of mass culture development could not be turned back, and by the late 1990s most were obliged to accept the role of mass culture.

At the time of debate, popular literature, as part of mass culture, was still looked down upon by academics and critics. Literary works were divided into 'serious' 严肃 and 'popular' 通俗. Acting as a pioneer for the process of commercialization, Wang Shuo bore the brunt of much of the criticism.

The situation has since changed, and Wang Shuo is still not accepted by many intellectuals. The critic Jing Wang pointed out that: people still 'are bashing Wang

Shuo in public and reading Wang Shuo behind closed doors.’⁷⁸ This can only make the ‘Wang Shuo phenomenon’ last longer than people expected.

⁷⁸ Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics and Ideology in Deng's China*. London, England: University of California Press, 1996, p.286

Chapter I

Wang Shuo's Life and Work

Sheryl Wudunn thinks Wang Shuo is not a dissident, but he is more dangerous. She said:

‘Perhaps the single most subversive person I know in China is not Wei Jingsheng 魏京生, the charismatic dissident who spent fourteen and a half years in prison, or Wang Dan 王丹, the student leader of the Tian’anmen democracy movement. Rather, in the broadest sense, the most subversive person I know may well be Wang Shuo.’⁷⁹

Wang Shuo not only brought the Beat Generation to China, but also set himself up as a successful model for younger generations. Scholarly critic Wang Yichuan, like many others, offers a high evaluation of Wang Shuo's role in the development of contemporary Chinese society. He commented that Wang Shuo's life is ‘a fairytale of an individual successful hero’.⁸⁰ The fact that Wang Shuo went from being criticised as a ‘hooligan’ and ‘a multicoloured poisonous spider’⁸¹ to become the ‘Wang Shuo fairytale’ is an interesting comment on a dramatically changed society.

Biography

Wang Shuo was born in 1958.⁸² His father was a teacher at the People's Liberation Army Political College,⁸³ and his mother was a doctor. Wang Shuo grew up in an

⁷⁹ Nicholas D. Kristof & Sheryl Wudunn, *China Wakes*, p.283

⁸⁰ Wang Yichuan 王一川, ‘Yuyan shenhua de zhongjie’ 语言神话的终结 (The End of the Language Fairytale), *Xuexi yu tansuo* 学习与探索 (Study and Exploration), 1999, vol. 3, pp.111-116

⁸¹ Lao Yu 老愚, ‘A Colourful Poisonous Spider’ 一只色彩斑斓的毒蜘蛛, *China Youth*, 30/01/1993, quoted from *Wang Shuo, dashi haishi pizi* 王朔, 大师还是痞子 (Wang Shuo: Master or Hooligan), Gao Bo 高波 (ed.), Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Chubanshe, 1993. pp.28-29

⁸² A primary source here is: Wang Shuo, *Wo shi Wang Shuo*, 我是王朔 (I am Wang Shuo), Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 1992

army courtyard in Beijing, at No. 29 Fuxing lu 复兴路. When the Cultural Revolution started, Wang Shuo was in the second year of primary school. His father was discovered to have been a policeman for the former KMT government before he joined the revolution. This became black mark against him during the Cultural Revolution. Wang Shuo's relationship with his father is one of the formative influences on his life. His father often beat him. Far from breaking his resistance, this made him physically stronger and also encouraged him to develop a rebellious spirit, which has never left him. He began to despise his father, and then transferred this attitude to authority in general.

Wang Shuo went to the Number 164 middle school in Beijing, also called Shaoshan 韶山⁸⁴ middle school. He joined a gang of boys who fought with other gangs of teenage boys. Wang Shuo's story Dongwu xiongmeng 动物凶猛 (Wild Animal) reflected this period of his life. He was arrested twice by the police. The first time was when he was involved in a gang fight and was kept in the police station for just one day. The second time he was arrested was in 1976. This was during the events of '5th April'⁸⁵ in Tian'anmen Square. A boy from his courtyard was arrested and claimed Wang Shuo smashed a bike belonging to the people's militia. Wang Shuo denied it, nevertheless he was imprisoned for 3 months.⁸⁶ No matter what the truth of the episode was, his experience in prison tarnished his image even more. Yet, Wang Shuo openly talked about it rather than hide it. This was also true of his other shortcomings,

⁸³ Jiefangjun zhengzhi xueyuan 解放军政治学院, now called Guofang daxue 国防大学 (the National Defence University).

⁸⁴ The hometown of Chairman Mao Zedong 毛泽东, in Hunan province.

⁸⁵ To commemorate the death of premier minister Zhou Enlai 周恩来, many people went to Tian'anmen Square; the resulting demonstration was put down by the government at the time; the event was reassessed in the 1980s.

⁸⁶ Wang Shuo, *Wo shi Wang Shuo*, 我是王朔 (I am Wang Shuo), p.10

such as living off his girl friend. Usually the public had never been treated to such intimate details of a writer's life, including potentially shameful episodes. According to Wang Shuo the prison officers were all rather sadistic, and he was subjected to a mass of petty irritations. His unpleasant experiences in prison early in his life undoubtedly influenced Wang Shuo's attitude towards politics, culture, the law and government policies, as portrayed in his delinquent writings, films and TV serials, etc. Nevertheless, Wang Shuo did not want to end up in prison like 1989 movement dissidents, such as Wang Dan 王丹, Liu Xiaobo 刘小波 and so on. His ironic use of political language and his criticism of intellectuals are kept within bounds, to ensure they do not provoke full-scale retaliation by the authorities.

Influenced by political propaganda, Wang Shuo had the same dreams as many other children at that time of liberating the whole world. He always felt a sense of responsibility towards humanity, and believed this responsibility would be exercised through the People's Liberation Army.⁸⁷ He was always excited by major world events.⁸⁸ The enormous influence of the historical period he was growing up in is also reflected in the language used in his stories; he has an excellent command of political language and the ironic use of it.

In 1976, when Wang Shuo left middle school, his father made him join the navy. He was a nurse and worked on a ship of the North Sea Fleet operating out of Qingdao 青岛. When he was in the navy, the most unbearable thing to him was the great disparity in status between different ranks. Ordinary ratings ate steamed corn bread and salted

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.40 (从小我最大的欲望是解放全人类.....我一直觉得我对人类负有责任, 这个责任将通过人民解放军完成.)

⁸⁸ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.8 (从小让我激动的事都是世界上的大事, 没有什么自己的事.)

vegetables everyday. One night when Wang Shuo was on watch, he saw the commanding officer eating from a table of delicious food, including meat and alcoholic drink. Wang Shuo would never again believe the propaganda about the 'unity between officers and men.' (guan bing yi zhi 官兵一致). At a banquet, which was a very rare treat and looked forward to for a long time, Wang Shuo and other ratings were already seated, when suddenly two senior officers came in. The cooks did not have time to prepare food for them, so Wang Shuo and two other ratings were asked to give up their places without eating, so that the two senior officers could eat.⁸⁹ These early experiences shaped Wang Shuo's ideas about power, the armed forces and society. He refused to believe the propaganda and sought fun and freedom in life; he pursued girls and amused himself by the seaside, ignoring the high-minded rhetoric of the navy. Many young people like Wang Shuo were more influenced by their social experiences than official exhortations; many people felt deceived, including 'intellectual young people' 知识青年 sent to the countryside for re-education during the Cultural Revolution. Their disillusionment meant that young people stopped listening to instructions about contributing to build a socialist country and sacrificing yourself for other people. This phenomenon was criticised as 'a crisis of faith' 信仰危机, and the young people were called Beatnik generation 垮掉的一代.

In 1978, Wang Shuo worked in an army warehouse, where he wrote his first story "Dengdai" 等待 (Waiting).⁹⁰ Because the story impressed the editors of the *People's Liberation Army Literature and Art* 解放军文艺 magazine, he was invited to work

⁸⁹ Zuo Shula 左舒拉, 'Wang Shuo—yige miaoshi changgui de 'suren'' 王朔——一个藐视常规的 '俗人' (Wang Shuo—A 'Vulgar Person' Who Belittles the Ordinary Rules), *Dazhong dianying* 大众电影, 1989, vol. 6, pp.14-15

⁹⁰ See Chapter I: Early Writing to Hooligan Literature

there. In 1978, the economic reforms were just starting, and Wang Shuo was very much attracted by the chance of doing business and earning more money, so after a few months working in the magazine editorial office, he left.⁹¹

He joined a group of people going to the South, to cities such as Guangzhou, and areas in Guangdong provinces, buying TV sets and tape recorders and selling in Northern cities, such as Beijing. He enjoyed the money he made and did not worry about the future. This period of his life is described in Wang Shuo's story "Xiangpi ren" 橡皮人 (Rubber Man) and the novel *Wan de jiu shi xintiao* 玩的就是心跳 (Playing for Thrills). In 1979, the war between China and Vietnam started. Wang Shuo's traditional military patriotism was revived; he left his business and friends, and went back to the North Sea Fleet. However, the fleet played no part in the war; in his disappointment, Wang Shuo took to wandering around the streets as before.⁹²

Wang Shuo stayed in the navy until 1980, when he was demobilized and returned to Beijing. He was sent to work in the state owned Beijing Pharmaceutical Company as a salesman. During work time he smoked, chatted, read newspapers and drank tea, just like most ordinary staff in state owned units. He was paid 36 yuan⁹³ a month. After Wang Shuo admitted to illegal income (after a member of his group told the police Wang Shuo was smuggling), 30 yuan was deducted from his salary. He was only left with 6 yuan to live on. He thought this was insufficient so he started doing business

⁹¹ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.68

⁹² Zuo Shula, 'Wang Shuo—A 'Vulgar Person' Who Belittle the Ordinary Rules', *Dazhong dianying*, 1989, vol. 6, pp.14-15

⁹³ Yuan (¥) is the main unit of Chinese currency (Renminbi 人民币), according to current exchange rate £1 = ¥13.50 (yuan).

with other people, including running a restaurant.⁹⁴ In 1983, he gave up his job, but none of his businesses were successful, so as money ran out he started borrowing money to live on. He lived off an airhostess girlfriend and started writing stories again in 1984. The story Kongzhong xiaojie 空中小姐 (Air Hostess) reflects this period of Wang Shuo's life.

Writing Motivation

Wang Shuo's motivation in becoming a writer was mainly for commercial reasons and money-driven, not idealistic, and not orientated towards contributing to the development of the country like the earlier generations of writers. What Wang Shuo grasped before others was that the reforms had allowed writing to become a commercial activity. In this activity, it was the publishers and the buying public that determined what was publishable, not the Chinese Communist Party. Deregulation of the market made it suddenly competitive. The reading public no longer had to read whatever the party decided was appropriate; they could choose instead to buy what they wanted. Writers could make a living from their writing without the need to become a salaried member of the Writers' Association. The Writers' Association was an official policy driven system that rewarded the politically reliable; the brave new world was for risk-takers and showmen.

There was a gulf between the motivation the authorities hoped for in a writer and Wang Shuo's motivation. This is evident if he is compared with other writers, such as

⁹⁴ Zuo Shula, 'Wang Shuo—A 'Vulgar Person' Who Belittles the Ordinary Rules', *Dazhong dianying*, 1989, vol. 6, pp.14-15

the great model of every writer in China, Lu Xun. He gave up medicine and started writing because he looked to literature and art to transform the national spirit. He said:

‘The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it is not necessarily deplorable, no matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement.’⁹⁵

Lu Xun’s motivation in writing remained the model strongly advocated by the Chinese Communist Party.

After 1949, none of the contemporary writers before Wang Shuo had ever tried to make a living just by selling their stories. This was not in keeping with the literary policy of CCP over the past decades, which was always, and until now still is, based on Mao Zedong’s 1942 ‘Talks At The Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art’. Mao pointed out the function of literature and art and demanded that writers follow this:

‘The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.’⁹⁶

This has been assiduously followed by almost all writers. For example, Wang Meng started writing after his application to study architecture at university, in order, literally, to build the country, was refused by the party organization where he worked.⁹⁷ Mao’s ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art’ deeply influenced Wang Meng’s concept of the role of a writer:

⁹⁵ Lu Xun, *Nahan* 呐喊 (Shout Loudly), Introduction, pp.2-3, Beijing: Renmin-wenxue chubanshe, 1981; translation from: *Selected Works of Lu Hsun*, vol. 1, p.3 Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1956

⁹⁶ Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 3, p.70 Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1965

⁹⁷ Wang Meng 王蒙, ‘Wenxue yu wo’ 文学与我 (Literature and I), *Wang Meng wenji* 王蒙文集 (Collected Works of Wang Meng), vol. 7, pp.649-657, Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1993

'I always believed that literature and revolution are inherently indivisible.....Literature is the pulse of revolution, its signal, its conscience. And revolution is literature's guide, its soul and its source.'⁹⁸

The idea that 'literature and revolution are inherently indivisible' has been an article of faith for generations of writers in the period of the socialist China.

Among Wang Shuo's generation of writers, Wang Anyi 王安忆 has been an outstandingly productive woman writer of the New Era period. When Wang Anyi reviewed her earliest motivation for writing, she said:

'At the very beginning, I wrote stories just because I had something to say. I poured out my feelings, my experiences and ideas I gained in my life.....However, I gradually felt dissatisfied. In fact, when I chose story writing as an activity to pursue, the need that was concealed there was the need to create.'⁹⁹

Wang Anyi's modest claim for the profession is a common attitude among this later generation of writers, rejecting the overblown claims of their predecessors.

Among Wang Shuo's generation of writers is another rebel Wang Xiaobo 王小波. He died at the age of 45 in 1997. This shocked the whole country, and Wang Xiaobo's collected works were posthumously published soon afterwards. He was born in 1952, worked in Yunnan and Shandong provinces during the Cultural Revolution, had a BA degree in Economics and an MA from Pittsburgh University. He was a lecturer at Beijing and Renmin Universities, who ignored his father's plea not to go into writing. He resigned from his lecturing post in 1992 when he was 40 and wrote full-time until his death in 1997. During these five years he wrote most of his works. He could not explain why he wanted to write. He gave a metaphor: when a mountaineer is asked

⁹⁸ Wang Meng, *The Butterfly and Other Stories*, p.14. Beijing: Chinese Literature Press, 1983.

⁹⁹ Wang Anyi 王安忆, 'Wo de xiaoshuo guan' 我的小说观 (My Concept of Fiction), *Piaobo de yuyan* 漂泊的语言 (The Wandering Language), pp.330-332

why he wants to climb a dangerous mountain for no actual benefit, the mountaineer says because the mountain is there. Wang Xiaobo described the mountaineer's action as an 'entropy reduction' 减熵 phenomenon.¹⁰⁰ He also ascribes his desire to write to a similar motivation.

'If it is necessary to give further explanation about why I am determined to write, this is a process of entropy reduction. Writing is a general word, which covers many types of writing. Writing popular stories, love poems, etc. are things which should be categorised as an 'entropy increase' 熵增 procedure. The things I write are not popular at all; they not only do not make money, sometimes I have to pay money. The word 'serious' in serious writer should be understood like this. As far as I am aware, most famous serious writers in this world are living a passable life, but writers who are not famous cannot even enjoy a passable life. With the benefit of this explanation, everybody can understand I am indeed in an 'entropy reduction' situation.'¹⁰¹

Wang Xiaobo knew that writing would not make money for him, but he resigned from his university lecturer job and the stable life it offered. He ignored his father who suffered personally and saw other writers suffering during political movements over the past decades. Wang Xiaobo's father insisted he and his four siblings should study science rather than humanities or social science in order to help them avoid the frustrations he had in life. Yet he could not stop Wang Xiaobo's passion for writing.

Wang Xiaobo could not explain it either, he said:

'Of course, if you insist on me using one sentence to answer this question directly, it is: I believe I have talent for literature, and I should do this. However, this sentence is just like a murder suspect saying he did not murder people; you cannot trust either of us. So, whether you believe or not is up to you.'¹⁰²

Wang Xiaobo had confidence in his ability and talent. He was very idealistic, and was willing to sacrifice material benefit to pursue his passion. This is the traditional

¹⁰⁰ Wang Xiaobo claimed people tend to be attracted towards benefit and avoid harm; this is a natural phenomenon called 'entropy increase' 熵增 in thermodynamics. Hence if people tend towards harm and avoid benefit it should be called 'entropy reduction' 减熵. 'Wo-weishenme yao xiezuo' 我为什么写作 (Why do I want to write?), *Wang Xiaobo wenji* 王小波文集 (Collected Works of Wang Xiaobo), vol. 4, Beijing: Chinese Youth Publisher, 1999, pp. 296-300.

¹⁰¹ Wang Xiaobo, 'Why do I want to write?', *Collected Works of Wang Xiaobo*, vol. 4, pp.296-300

¹⁰² *ibid.*

writer's spirit, such as motivated Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 in writing *The Dream of The Red Chamber*, yet he died of poverty. Wang Xiaobo's pursuit of writing is in striking contrast with Wang Shuo's motivation.

Early Writing to Hooligan Literature

Wang Shuo's motivation in writing is considered an insult to the literary profession. It was an accident that started him writing.¹⁰³ After 1977, when universities reopened to students, studying at a university became the greatest aspiration for young people and their parents. Wang Shuo applied to study humanities and social science 文科. He did not pass the entrance exams, was not accepted by any university and felt very ashamed at the time. This setback cost Wang Shuo the chance to pass through the official formal education system. This was also a source of rebelliousness in Wang Shuo. He has fiercely criticised intellectuals who have had formal higher or further education. This is no doubt connected with his deficiencies in this respect. However, when he prepared his essay for his university examinations it became his first ever work to be published. He sent it to *Jiefangjun wenyi* 解放军文艺 (People's Liberation Army Literature and Art) magazine, and had it published; this was 'Dengdai' 等待 (Waiting). Wang Shuo talked about his literary experiences at that time, and reckoned he had a gift. He said:

'To be honest, I have a gift. Before that I had only read very few literary works, including my time in middle school, when I had read several famous 'pornographic' books¹⁰⁴ with no beginning and end, such as *Anna Karenina*.'¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Wang Shuo, *I am Wang Shuo*, p.15

¹⁰⁴ Many books were labelled as pornographic at that time, including classic Western works.

¹⁰⁵ Wang Shuo, *I am Wang Shuo*, p.17

His first story was five thousands words long; the editor made many changes to it, and sent him 25 yuan. Wang Shuo thought it was easy money.¹⁰⁶ At that time he still dreamt of doing business, and did not immediately focus on writing. Then, making money was the dream of urban young people. Although literature was very influential in society, and writers could become famous by publishing just one story,¹⁰⁷ nevertheless, none of these writers had become rich under the socialist system. Wang Shuo still hankered after making money by doing business rather than writing. He thought having money was better than anything.¹⁰⁸

This worship of material goods and love of money was certainly influenced by contact with the West resulting from the Open Door policy. Young people such as Wang Shuo were particularly influenced by this. They had experienced the corruption and bureaucracy of the old society; making lots of money became part of their dream of getting away from the various powers oppressing them, and gaining the status and freedom people who work in the state sector do not have.

After many business dreams foundered, in 1984 Wang Shuo was forced back to writing in an effort to 'pursue a dignified life' and a 'dignified social status and middle class life style.'¹⁰⁹ From then onwards, Wang Shuo became the first 'wenhua getihu' 文化个体户 (cultural entrepreneur) in the literary world. He consciously selected his market and readership, and wrote about the things and people he was familiar with. His great early success, 'Air Hostess', was written and published in

¹⁰⁶ Wang Shuo, *I am Wang Shuo*, p.17

¹⁰⁷ Such as Liu Xinwu 刘心武 who published Banzhuren 班主任 (The Class Teacher), the archetypal work of 'Scar Literature'.

¹⁰⁸ Wang Shuo, *I am Wang Shuo*, p.17

¹⁰⁹ Wang Shuo, 'Wang Shuo fangtanlu' 王朔访谈录 (Interview with Wang Shuo), *Lianhe bao* 联合报 (United News), 30/05/1993, quoted from Huang Fayou 黄发有, 'Ershi shiji zhongguo ziyou xiezuo lungang (xia)' 20世纪中国自由写作论纲 (下) (On Twentieth Century Chinese Free Writing (Part Two)), *Wenyi pinglun* 文艺评论 (Literature and Art Criticism), 2001, vol. 6, pp.18-27

1984, and soon afterwards the story was made into a TV serial. After that, Wang Shuo published stories regularly. He finally realised writing was his metier and wholeheartedly focussed on writing in this period.

At that time Wang Shuo had already started to use a very colloquial style to write. He said:

‘I don’t know what kind of language should be used in writing stories. If I use literary language to write, it will certainly not be what you expected; I do not know how to write that. I have no choice, I have to use spoken language to write in.’¹¹⁰

Wang Shuo did not join in any literary school or literary movement. He did not have the unpleasant experiences during the Cultural Revolution necessary to write ‘Scar Literature’; he did not have the experience of working as a peasant in the countryside necessary to write ‘Young Intellectual Literature’ 知青文学 nor ‘Root-Seeking Literature’, etc. At the early stage of Wang Shuo’s writing, his main literary efforts were love stories and detective stories. Later he started writing ‘tiaokan’ 调侃 stories employing Beijing street language. Wang Shuo created a unique ‘tiaokan’ language style, which was one of his most important achievements in his works.

Although Wang Shuo did not receive any higher and further education, his writing talent has been highly praised by people. The actor and TV serial director Ying Da 英达, a Peking University graduate who acted in Wang Shuo’s TV serials and cooperated many times in making TV serials, assessed Wang Shuo as follows:

‘Wang Shuo’s success comes from his cleverness. These things cannot be learnt. Wang Shuo often jokes about himself: ‘I know three to five thousand characters including wrong characters.’ ‘I have a low level of

¹¹⁰ Wang Shuo, *I am Wang Shuo*, p.21

education, I feel it is difficult to be in this profession.’ However, although we were lucky enough to have learned literature and language systematically, and we have theory, method, knowledge and skill, nevertheless, we cannot do what Wang Shuo has done. We should not say the natural way is to award the diligent; we should not talk about studying and practising hard, nor about perseverance spelling success. Real talent does not come through collecting knowledge or skills training; that quality was with him when he was born. Wang Shuo is a genius.’¹¹¹

Contrary to the belief of most Chinese people, Wang Shuo is living proof that a university education is not necessary for success in an intellectual field.

The woman writer Chi Li 池莉¹¹² said the following about Wang Shuo’s gift:

‘I think Wang Shuo is not accidental. He has never stopped trying. I met him in 1991 and 1992, when he was very sensitive about the country’s reforms. He watches step-by-step, grasps the market, and he knows what kind of thing brings economic benefit. Because the literary world has labelled him a popular writer, so he has made the best use of it, becoming completely ‘vulgar’ (su). He has prescience, he works with history, when the time was right he influenced the whole country.’¹¹³

Wang Shuo emphasises that his writing comes from his talent. He challenges the traditional guidance to young people, incorporated in old sayings such as ‘where there is a will there is a way’ 有志者事竟成, and ‘talent comes from hard work’ 勤奋出天才. He talked about his own knowledge based on his own experiences. He said:

‘Some popular sayings may be not scientifically true, such as “talent comes from hard work”; “ninety nine percent perspiration and one percent inspiration”; “where there is a will there is a way”, etc. These are not scientific..... I did not have difficulties with writing. That is not to say I am a very talented person. It is true that I have a gift. I did many things where I did not succeed: I did not fight as well as others; I could not make money by doing business; I could not get into university. However, I

¹¹¹ Ying Da 英达, ‘Wang Shuo de yuyan’ 王朔的语言 (Wang Shuo’s Language), Liang Huan 梁欢 (ed.), *Wang Shuo in Celebrities’ Eyes*, p.116-120

¹¹² Chi Li 池莉 was born in 1957, woman writer. She is same generation writer of Wang Shuo, and also Wang Shuo’s friend. She went well-known since late 1980s. Her works include ‘Fannaorensheng’ 烦恼人生 (Annoying Life), ‘Butanaiqing’ 不谈爱情 (Don’t Talk about Love). Her works in 1990s are very popular, some of them adopted into TV serials, such as ‘Lailaiwangwang’ 来来往往 (Socialization).

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p.104

progressed very smoothly on the road to writing. There are people who temper themselves in a thousand ways, but they must have a gift.'¹¹⁴

In his attitude to these traditional sayings, we can see Wang Shuo's deep skepticism towards things others accepted. The Cultural Revolution had already cast doubt upon the validity of traditional values; Wang Shuo's refusal to knuckle down to authority, both concrete and abstract, marks him out as a member of a new generation.

Three Pinnacles of Success

Wang Shuo's literary fame came much later than his cinematographic fame. It was the film world that discovered Wang Shuo and made him famous. 1988, 'the Wang Shuo Films Year' was Wang Shuo's first pinnacle. Four of his stories were made into films in a single year, a thing unprecedented in film history. This sent shock waves through the cultural world. *Wan zhu* 顽主 (The Operators), *Lunhui* 轮回 (Samsara), *Da chuanqi* 大喘气 (A Deep Breath) and *Yiban shi haishui, yiban shi huoyan* 一半是海水,一半是火焰 (Half Seawater Half Fire) were all entertainment films reflecting young urban people's lives at that stage of reform. These films are humorous and ironic. Some people criticised the fact that 'Wang Shuo's films' helped to generate publicity for him and began the 'Wang Shuo craze'. The literary world then started to pay attention to Wang Shuo. His work was heavily criticised as 'pizi wenxue' (hooligan literature). It became a unique literary style, which was very influential among writers who were born in the 1960s and emerged in the 1990s.

The second pinnacle came at the beginning of 1990s, when the TV serial *Kewang* 渴望 (Yearning) and *Bianjibu de gushi* 编辑部的故事 (Stories from Editor's Office)

¹¹⁴ Wang Shuo, *I am Wang Shuo*, p.69

made Wang Shuo a household name. He published many stories during this period; 'Wo shi ni baba' 我是你爸爸 (I Am Your Dad) was one of them. The 'Wang Shuo Craze' continued and spread to every field, and was recognised with the title the 'Wang Shuo Phenomenon'. Wang Shuo received more criticism from the literary world than the film and TV worlds. Perversely he became even more famous as a result of this criticism of his 'hooligan literature'; millions of his books were sold around the country, and he became the first millionaire cultural entrepreneur. The debate on 'humanism' 人文精神 started in 1993 was initiated by the 'Wang Shuo phenomenon'.

The third pinnacle was in 1999. It happened that Wang Shuo published an article on 1st November in *Chinese Youth* newspaper, which criticised Jin Yong's martial arts stories. This caused a furore across the country. Jin Yong's fans, critics and university scholars joined in the argument. Some of them stood by Jin Yong, and some took Wang Shuo's side. Wang Shuo did not appear deliberately to have set out to cause an argument by challenging the millions of Jin Yong fans and his academic admirers. Since then Wang Shuo has published a series of critical articles on various figures in the cultural field, including Lu Xun, Lao She, and Zhang Yimou. Wang Shuo was accused of setting up a 'mud-slinging school' 骂派. Through these three pinnacles of Wang Shuo's career, he has acted as a controversial figure that has provoked constant debates among Chinese intellectuals. He stands on the dividing line between the cultural and the commercial worlds.

Unique 'Hooligan'

Wang Shuo has spoken publicly about his past experiences, such as being in prison, fighting with other boys, being unemployed, and illicitly buying and selling goods. His stories portrayed many young people very much like him, who had no jobs, but just played cards and mahjong together all the time. Some are even criminals, including characters in *Half Seawater Half Fire* and *Rubber Man*. Wang Shuo thinks he is describing real life, and all these characters are real people who lived around him. At that time the director of Beijing Film Studio Song Chong 宋崇 said Wang Shuo's specialities are 'hooligan writing, hooligan behaviour, educating the next generation of new hooligans'¹¹⁵; the epithet 'hooliganism' (痞子论) started from there. Since then many people have called his works 'hooligan' literature, and Wang Shuo acquired a uniquely 'bad' name. The name 'hooligan' was never used for any writer before or after.

Wang Shuo originally thought the word 'hooligan' was an insult, but ten years later he had new understanding of it. He says:

'As I look at it now, it is precisely these words that showed appreciation of cultural spirit. Indeed, the real value of my works lies in the 'hooligan' spirit, not the early period of youthful angst, the so-called emotional parts.'¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Wang Shuo, *Wuzhizhe wuwei* 无知者无畏 (The Ignorant Know No Fear), 2000, p.11 (痞子写, 痞子演, 教育下一代新痞子)

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, p.12

The 'tiaokan' 调侃¹¹⁷ ('banter' or 'witty') language is his way of expressing this 'hooligan' spirit; it passes ironic comment on political problems, social phenomena and ideology without provoking bans from the authorities. Many films, TV serials and books used the 'tiaokan' language-style in the late 1990s. It spread throughout the cultural market, including mainstream cultural products.

Wang Shuo wants to be different from others all the time; he is the only one to enjoy being labelled 'bad' among cultural figures; the rest all aspire to a good name. Wang Shuo talked about his opinion on the 'bad' name, saying:

'Some articles are quite funny, they are totally sensationalist. Quoting huge chunks of my boasting, it was totally unreal. There were also articles trying their best to make me out as a conscious rebel, the image of a person who rejects all morality and tradition. They insist I am bad, just because hypocritical society made me bad. Actually it is not like that. Am I not hypocritical? I am hypocritical too. I thought if I cannot be famous with a good name, I can get famous with a bad name.'¹¹⁸

Afterwards Wang Shuo experienced various roles in popular culture, including popular writer, film script editor, TV serial script editor, planner for films and TV serials, actor (in the film *In the Heat of the Sun*), film director, internet literary presenter, executive of numerous cultural products companies, etc. In 1996, the government banned Wang Shuo's films and books. He tried to flee from trouble to America to support the publication of his stories in English. He stayed in America for six months in 1997. It was then that Wang Shuo recovered from his 'writer's block'

¹¹⁷ See Chapter II Wang Shuo's Fiction: II. Themes and Characteristics of Wang Shuo's 'Tiaokan' Stories

¹¹⁸ Wang Shuo, *I am Wang Shuo*, pp.44-45

写残了。¹¹⁹ The visits to America and Italy made him think a great deal about cultural differences, and he found his inspiration for writing again. He said: 'Before I did not know what I was, now I know if I were not writing stories I would be a fly without brain.'¹²⁰ While Wang Shuo met difficulties in other fields, he always returned to writing. After his criticism of Jin Yong, Lu Xun and so on, many people wondered whom Wang Shuo was going to criticise next?

When Wang Shuo describes himself, he uses the terms 'hooligan' 痞子, 'angry young man' 愤青, 'buffoon' 小丑, and 'one off' 独一份儿。¹²¹ Wang Shuo often acts precipitately causing debates, criticism and arguments in every field, crossing the boundaries of the field, and involving ordinary people, especially young people. As they participate in the 'Wang Shuo craze', Wang Shuo leads them in the direction of a new culture, after decades of hypocrisy and ideological aridity.

¹¹⁹ Jia Leilei 贾磊磊, 'Wo bu xiang yibeizi dang zuojia—yu Wang Shuo duihualu' 我不想一辈子当作家——与王朔对话录, (I Do Not Want To Be A Writer All My Life—The Talk with Wang Shuo), *Guoji rencai jiaoliu* 国际人才交流 (International Exchange of Talent), 1995, vol. 4-5, pp.82-85

¹²⁰ Mu Zhai 木斋, *Yu Zhongguo zuojia duihua* 与中国作家对话 (Talking With Chinese Writers), 1999, p.47

¹²¹ *ibid.*, pp.43-49

Chapter II

Wang Shuo's Fiction

I. Wang Shuo's Love Stories

As writers like Xu Xing 徐星 and Liu Suola 刘索拉 were publishing their typical avant-garde stories,¹²² Wang Shuo was about to start writing his stories in order to make a living. After reading a number of stories, including Tie Ning's 铁凝 story 'Meiyou niukou de hong chenshan' 没有纽扣的红衬衫 (The Buttonless Red Shirt, 1982), Wang Shuo realised that such stories were not pure fabrication, but that they were based on the writer's experiences and that he could write things based on his experiences. He thought that some of these were more interesting than things other people had written about, and that writing would not be difficult. Therefore, Wang started by writing about his own life.¹²³

Wang started with his own experience of love with an airhostess. He thought the career of an airhostess would appear glamorous to readers and editors in the mid 1980s, so the story would easily get published.¹²⁴ This is his first love story, 'Kongzhong xiaojie' 空中小姐 (Air Hostess). He then wrote another love story, 'Fu chu haimian' 浮出海面 (Floating above the Sea), based on the experiences that led to his first marriage. This story was soon made into a film *Lunhui* 轮回 (Samsara).

¹²² Xu Xing 徐星, 'Wu zhuti bianzou' 无主题变奏 (Variations Without A Theme), 1985; Liu Suola 刘索拉, *Ni bie wu xuanze* 你别无选择 (You Have No Other Choice), 1985.

¹²³ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.20

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p.21

Wang Shuo gained in confidence from writing these stories and they are more significant in terms of his writing career and his life than the impact they made on the literary world.

There was no famous popular writer on the Chinese mainland, of either love stories or detective stories, in whose footsteps Wang could follow. Wang chose to start writing love stories for a number of reasons. He talked about his mentality at that time:

‘When I first started writing, it was because I was rather desperate about life and had no other way out. At that time, stories all required a big and beautiful background in order to portray a real society, and then I chose the theme of females because I could only choose females—in a politicised society, males were worse. I began writing romances, in which the narrative object could only be females. In my twenties, I hoped desperately that a miracle would appear in my life. Of course that meant love—to encounter an angelic woman. I cherished this wish for many years.’¹²⁵

Writing love stories was part of Wang Shuo’s desire to change his life. It was not because he thought he was good at writing love stories, nor because love stories could make him more money. His love stories were all published in serious literary magazines, and were paid at the same rate as other stories. In the early 1980s, literature was expected to praise the positive aspects of life. In the political society; Wang Shuo chose women and love stories to reflect the warm and beautiful aspects of life, which suited people’s expectations of such stories, and ensured that they would be publishable. Wang was not yet clear in which direction the love story would lead him. Practical concerns in life influenced Wang’s attitude towards writing.

¹²⁵ ‘Wang Shuo shengming zhong de aiqing he nüren’ 王朔生命中的爱情和女人 (Love and Women in Wang Shuo’s Life), quoted from Xinyusi dianzi wenku 新语丝电子文库 (Xinyusi Electrical Literary Store) www.xys.org/xys/ebooks/literature/novels/Wang-Shuo/nvren.txt

When Wang Zhaoqian 汪兆骞, editor of the literary magazine *Dangdai*, recalled what Wang Shuo was like at the time his first few stories were published in that magazine, he said Wang was very diligent and wrote very quickly. One day Wang Shuo took four stories along, and let him choose which one he wanted. The two stories he chose for publication were love stories about young urban people, 'Yong shi wo ai' 永失我爱 (Losing My Love Forever) and 'Wu ren hecai' 无人喝彩 (Nobody Cheers).¹²⁶ Wang's anxiety about making a living can be seen by the urgency with which he put these four stories forward for publication.

These were relatively pure love stories without any strong social issues in the background, and may be described as 'love stories about ordinary people' 小户人家的爱情故事.¹²⁷ They typically described two urban young people falling in love, then splitting up, and then getting back together and getting married. The pattern of the stories followed a typical love story format characteristic of popular fiction. The endings of these stories are all 'vulgar' happy endings, intended to comfort and satisfy readers, as in *Nobody Cheers*¹²⁸ and 'Guo ba yin jiu si' 过把瘾就死 (Enjoy then Die).¹²⁹ These love stories are simply structured with an uncomplicated plot: there is usually just one male and one female protagonist; there are no complicated love-

¹²⁶ Chen Yidao 陈一刀, 'Wang Shuo jiqi kongzhongxiaojie zouru 'Dangdai'' 王朔及其空中小姐走入 '当代' (Wang Shuo and his *Air Hostess* Walk into 'Contemporary'), *Beijing qingnian bao* 北京青年报 (Beijing Youth), 28/11/2000, p.26

¹²⁷ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.37

¹²⁸ *Nobody Cheers* 无人喝彩. This story concerns a young couple, who often argue after they get married, and so decide to get divorced. Because of a lack of accommodation, after the divorce they still live together in the same flat, but in separate rooms. Soon they both have other people chasing them, but they keep interfering with each other, and finally realise that they still care about each other very much, and decide to get back together.

¹²⁹ *Enjoy then Die* 过把瘾就死. This story is told by a first person narrator, an ordinary young man who marries a nurse. The couple frequently argue over trivial things in life, including jealousy, and their life seems like in a battlefield. Finally, they get divorced, but after a period they meet again accidentally and get back together.

triangles or great disparities in social or political status. In fact, they are rather plain stories with no dramatic plot; the changes in the love lives of the characters are treated as normal aspects of life. No detailed explanations or analyses of these changes are given: the inner worlds of the characters are ignored, and social influences on the characters are de-emphasised. The male and female protagonists do not meet with any outside pressure or barriers. Love is not treated as great romance or the dream of a lifetime. Compared with love stories by women writers of the same period, such as Zhang Jie's 'Ai shi bu neng wangji de' 爱是不能忘记的 (Love Cannot Be Forgotten) and Wang Anyi's 王安忆 'Xiaocheng zhi lian' 小城之恋 (Love In A Small Town), Wang's love stories lacked deep emotion, and were in no way outstanding or influential.

On the other hand, Wang's love stories do not fall into the official pattern of 'revolution + romance' 革命加恋爱 stories, which dominated modern literary history; nor did he use them to reflect social issues, for example, as part of 'Scar Literature'. His love stories contain few ideological or political messages, and at the same time there is no praise or criticism of society. Zhang Kangkang 张抗抗¹³⁰ commented that, although Wang Shuo's stories were basic, there were not many stories describing such 'pure' expressions of love in the literary world of the Chinese mainland at that time, and that he had touched on some aspects of the nature of love.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Zhang Kangkang 张抗抗, was born in 1950, she is a woman writer, and she is also a same generation writer of Wang Shuo, went famous in 1980s, representative works: 'Xia' 夏 (Summer), 'Dandan de chenwu' 淡淡的晨雾 (Light Morning Fog), 'Yinxing banlü' 隐形伴侣 (Invisible Partner).

¹³¹ Zhang Kangkang 张抗抗, 'Wan de bu shi wenxue' 玩的不是文学 (Literature Is Not What He Playing at), Liang Huan (ed.), *Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes*, pp.121-127

These love stories did not attract any response from the literary field. Very few critics comment on popular love stories, detective stories or martial arts stories in China, which are still not treated as serious objects for research. For example, the love stories of Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 and Zhang Henshui 张恨水, which were famous in the 1930s and 1940s, were not mentioned in official modern Chinese literary history books, until fifty years later,¹³² since they were seen as popular literature with a vulgar tone, and were criticised as 'yuanyang hudie pai' 鸳鸯蝴蝶派 (mandarin duck and butterfly school) by the left wing, suggesting escapist, idle and carefree, being out of touch with social reality, and of not pushing forward the development of society by supporting the revolution. However, Wang Shuo's stories were particularly welcomed by film and TV serials makers, and many of them were made into films and TV serials in the early 1990s.

Becoming a professional love story writer was one of Wang Shuo's big ambitions: 'Let Chinese children who are born in the next century think of Wang Shuo when love stories are mentioned.'¹³³ Pornographic books are illegal and viewed as something shameful in China; Wang Shuo has declared that he does have moral principles, and does not explicitly describe sex scenes in his stories.¹³⁴ Yet, he wanted his love stories to rival the popularity of pornographic books and magazines. These ambitions were not realised. Wang Shuo was not able to make lots of money quickly by writing love stories, but turned to editing TV serials and films where he could earn much more.

¹³² Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo shi 中国现代小说史 (The History of Modern Chinese Fiction), Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe 中国人民大学出版社, 1984; Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi 中国现代文学史 (The History of Modern Chinese Literature), Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe 辽宁人民出版社, 1984

¹³³ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, pp.36-38 (让下个世纪出生的中国孩子,一提'言情',就是王朔.)

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p.38

However, while Wang Shuo was making films and TV serials, he expressed his continued interest in love by making it the main theme of a number of works. Examples are the TV serials *Ai ni mei shangliang* 爱你没商量 (Loving You Unconditionally) (1993), and the films *Yi sheng tanxi* 一声叹息 (A Sigh) (2000) and *Wo ai ni* 我爱你 (I Love You) (2002). Sometimes he used the issue of love as an ingredient, as in the TV serial *Stories of the Editorial Office* (1991). We may compare Wang's love stories with popular young woman writer Wei Hui's 卫慧 'Shanghai baobei' 上海宝贝 (Shanghai Baby) published in 1999. The work is based partly on her own love experiences, and includes the latest ideas on issues relating to love and sex, homosexuality, drugs, and sexual relationships with foreigners; these are things which were traditionally not acceptable topics. The story describes vividly the efforts of the younger generation to break free of the restraints of traditional moral principles and value systems in their desire for a free and modern lifestyle. By contrast, Wang Shuo's conservative concept of love and his characters' lifestyles, in *Playing For Thrills* for example, are stuck in the 1980s. Although the protagonist Fang Yan pursues different girlfriends, he always has a dream of finding love and living in loving relationship. *Shanghai Baby* emphasises the madness of sexual life, the biological needs. Both Wang Shuo and Wei Hui describe young people pursuing materialistic enjoyment. In Wang Shuo's novels this involves endless eating and drinking in restaurants, dealing in luxury goods, TV sets, tape recorders, etc. In Wei Hui's novel, famous brands of perfume, beautiful clothes, the latest music hits, the names of fashionable foreign writers are all constantly referred to; all of these reflect the modern Western lifestyle of Shanghai, as worshipped by millions of young people. The objects referred to in Wang Shuo's works (including his novels, TV serials and films) have gone out of fashion and he has not been able to keep up with

the latest changes in young people's lives. It is now more difficult for him to produce durable and popular stories for the coming younger generations on the theme of love and sex.

II. Themes and Characteristics of Wang Shuo's 'Tiaokan' Stories

a. Rebellious Hooligan: *The Operators, Nothing Serious & You Are Not An Ordinary Man*

'Tiaokan' and 'Liumang'

Wang Shuo's stories have been described as 'black and decadent'¹³⁵ and 'a colourful poisonous spider'.¹³⁶ Wang Shuo became a main target of a 'spiritual civilization' campaign in 1996. His works and his films are banned in China, considered by the authorities as 'promoting social vices and making people doubt the future of socialism.'¹³⁷ Considering that some of Wang Shuo's works had already been published for nearly ten years, and that society then was much more open, Westernized and commercialized than in the late 1980s, this decision seems bizarre. Why did Wang Shuo's works produce such a reaction from the government?

'Although Wang's public image is that of a swaggering tough guy, his private manner is soft-spoken and unfailingly polite. In the eyes of Chinese officials, he is something far more dangerous than a dissident: he's a satirist with deadly aim.'¹³⁸

Wang Shuo had received great encouragement from the success of his early love stories and detective stories. He did not participate in the main literary movements of that time, such as 'Reform Literature' or 'Avant-garde Literature'. Instead, he explored new fields and a new style, referred to as 'tiaokan' 调侃 stories or 'pizi wenxue' 痞子文学 (hooligan literature).

¹³⁵ Chen Sihe 陈思和, 'Heise de tuifei' 黑色的颓废 (Black Decadence), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 (Review of Contemporary Writers), 1989, vol. 5, pp.33-40

¹³⁶ Lao Yu 老愚, 'Yizhi secai banlan de du zhizhu' 一只色彩斑斓的毒蜘蛛 (A Colourful Poisonous Spider), *China Youth*, 30/01/1993, quoted from Gao Bo 高波 (ed.), *Wang Shuo: dashi haishi pizi* 大师还是痞子 (Wang Shuo: Master or Hooligan), Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Chubanshe, 1993. pp.28-29

¹³⁷ Jamie James, 'Bad Boy', *The New Yorker*, April 21, 1997, pp.50-53

¹³⁸ *ibid*

Li Donghui translated 'tiaokan' as 'teases and taunts'; according to her textual research, 'tiaokan':

'originally meant telling jokes or tall tales for amusement among men or for teasing and flirting between men and women. It is also a rhetorical device commonly used in 'xiangsheng' 相声 (comic talk shows), a popular folk art form in Beijing.'¹³⁹

Wang Shuo's 'tiaokan' all seems to be based on 'common' people whose education level is not high. They do not have to be reasonable, but can be extreme in their rebellion against authority, ideology and language. The critic Wang Yichuan commented:

'It is a language rebelling against authority's language and elite monologues, a language which appears in the guise of the common people's common language. It reflects that strategy in using the criteria of common people to satirize the elegant language of fraud and deception.'¹⁴⁰

Wang Shuo's representative 'tiaokan' stories include 'Wan zhu' 顽主 (The Operators), 'Yi dianr zhengjing meiyou' 一点儿正经没有 (顽主续篇) (Nothing Serious: A Sequel To 'The Operators'), 'Ni bu shi yi ge su ren' 你不是一个俗人 (You Are Not An Ordinary Man), 'Wan de jiu shi xin tiao' 玩的就是心跳 (Playing for Thrills), and 'Qianwan bie ba wo dang ren' 千万别把我当人 (Please Don't Call Me Human). It was these 'tiaokan' stories that made Wang Shuo a controversial, and a famous or even notorious figure. These stories were written between 1986 and 1992; this is Wang Shuo's most important period of writing.

¹³⁹ Li Donghui, *The 'Phenomenon' of Wang Shuo: A Historico-Literary Consideration*, PhD Dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, p.33

¹⁴⁰ Wang Yichuan 王一川, 'Yuyan shenhua de zhongjie' 语言神话的终结 (The End of the Language Fairytale), *Xuexi yu tansuo* 学习与探索 (Study and Exploration), 1999, vol.3, pp.111-116

From the mid-1980s, young urban people begin to be portrayed as marginal people and hippies by Xu Xing and Liu Suola. Wang Shuo's works pushed the boundaries much further out. The characters Wang Shuo portrays in his stories are criticized by society as 'hooligans' (*pizi* 痞子 or *liumang* 流氓). The sinologist John Minford has pointed out that *liumang* has a wider meaning with connotations of displacement, alienation and ostracism. It includes rapists, whores, black-marketeers, as well as unemployed youth, alienated intellectuals, frustrated artists or poets, etc.¹⁴¹ In the 1980s, society was still under the strict state control system, so if people had no regular job but hung around doing odd things, they were likely to end up regarded as hooligans.¹⁴²

Challenging Literature

Wang Shuo's most powerful satire targets literature, intellectuals and official political circles. The three stories *The Operators*, *Nothing Serious*, *You Are Not An Ordinary Man* use 'wanzhu' 顽主¹⁴³ type characters and colloquial dialogue to focus on satirizing literature and intellectuals. These three stories do not have very much by way of plot, but mainly rely on the language of 'teases and taunts'.

The three stories are all 'ridiculous' stories with same group of characters: Fang Yan 方言, Yu Guan 于观, Ma Qing 马青, and Yang Zhong 杨重. In *The Operators*, these

¹⁴¹ Geremie Barmé, 'Wang Shuo and Liumang ('Hooligan') Culture', *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, Volume O, Issue 28 (Jul., 1992), p.50

¹⁴² Wang Shuo explained 'hooligan' or 'riffraff' saying: 'In China, if you don't have a wife and a family and a job, then you're a hooligan. If you're not a hypocrite, then you're a hooligan.' Jamie James, 'Bad Boy', *The New Yorker*, April 21, 1997, p.51

¹⁴³ 'Wanzhu' 顽主, 'Wan' 顽 has two meanings, firstly it means incorrigibly obstinate, no enterprising spirit, secondly it means play game, such as cynical practical joke. The two meanings are connected with each other, and often use wanpi 顽皮 to describe naughty children. The word 'wan zhu' 顽主 is not only used for describing characters in Wang Shuo's these three stories but also in his other 'tiaokan' 调侃 stories.

young people run a company called 'Three T' (三替)¹⁴⁴, which provides services that are in demand but not elsewhere available at that time to people in need. These include meeting and accompanying the client's girlfriend on a date; pretending to be the client's husband and being shouted at and abused; giving advice to people who feel life is meaningless and so on. The story *Nothing Serious* describes these young people who want to be writers chatting as they play poker, and in a surreal scene are put in the court of literature and judged by a powerful old man. The story *You Are Not An Ordinary Man* describes these young people going round and flattering people, mainly intellectuals, for free. Wang Shuo claimed that 'we are new generation, we want to use our own eyes to see the world.'¹⁴⁵ And he called his characters 'socialist new people' 社会主义新人.¹⁴⁶

What is Literature?

After decades of political movements, China was still a highly politicised society. Literature, like other forms of art, had the responsibility of expressing the hopes of the nation, acting as the heart of society and pointing the way to the future for the country. These ideals continued to inform the literary movements of the 1980s: 'Scar Literature', 'Root-seeking Literature', 'Reform Literature' etc. These literary movements all delivered messages from the authorities that people should introspect about the past and worry about the future of the country. This infused literature with a sense of mission and responsibility, continuing the tradition in modern Chinese

¹⁴⁴ 'Three T' (三替) means they solve difficulties for people (ti ren jie nan 替人解难), amuse people when they get bored (ti ren jie men 替人解闷), and take the punishment for wrong doings of people (ti ren shou guo 替人受过)

¹⁴⁵ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 2, p.148 (我们是新一代青年, 要用自己的眼睛去看世界.)

¹⁴⁶ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.171

history that literature is always closely linked with politics. Wang Shuo satirizes the situation in which literature is expected to produce a 'remedy for the country.'¹⁴⁷

The ancient injunction 'the function of literature is to convey the Tao' 文以载道,¹⁴⁸ source) has continued to be used as criterion for literature, even though the dao 道 itself has undergone radical change. Literature is used as a metaphor for the essence of human thought, as a banner indicating the direction of development for society, and the writer as the engineer of the human soul. Literature is sacred and noble, not something common people are capable of creating; the content of literature consists of serious and weighty themes. These include the problems of administering the country, which literature is expected to help solve; it portrays a glorious history with model figures of heroes and heroines for people to imitate, etc. Wang Shuo tried to challenge these age-old concepts of literature. In order to destroy the sacred image of literature, Wang Shuo emphasizes his own feelings about literature by using shocking ways to express this; Fang Yan says:

"Literature is bitterness'that has to be excreted; it is intensely pleasurable work, like sex!The key thing is.....you should fuck literature, and not let literature fuck you!"¹⁴⁹

In conservative China most people could not believe that Wang Shuo could use the metaphor of literature being like 'sex'; a subject considered dirty and obscene, and too shameful to mention. This was a big shock to people, and reflected the strongly rebellious spirit of Wang Shuo. This is also evidence used to condemn Wang Shuo for being in charge of 'hooligan literature.' Wang Shuo attacked the deep-rooted concept

¹⁴⁷ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.2, p.452 (倒霉事一写一串串的. 都知道有病, 缺的是药方子, 给国家开药那可不是玩的.)

¹⁴⁸ Zhou Dunyi 周敦颐 (1017-1073), Wenci 文辞 (Diction) in Tong shu 通书 (Comprehensive Book)

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.483 (文学就是痛苦--.....得排泄, 大大的快感, 性交一样的.....干活!) '关键在于.....得你操文学——不能让文学操了你!)

of the function of literature and its stubborn persistence by using an extreme metaphor.

Wang Shuo attacks the old concept of literature from different angles. Society is developing from a focus on politics to one on economics; literary products are the same as other products in having their commercial value. From this point of view Wang Shuo posed some shocking questions about literature. He asked:

‘Literature? What is literature? Is it wild or artificially planted by humans? How much a pound is it?’¹⁵⁰

Literature shows its fragility in the face of economic reform. It poses as a brave challenge to people’s old concepts; glorious literature belongs to the superstructure, superior to other things. Literature is never needs to consider money; the literary artist is ashamed to talk about money. Literature’s high status was completely destroyed by the economic reforms of the 1990s.

‘Writing is a kind of literary game where famous writers can do as they please, but new writers have to follow the rules’¹⁵¹ is Wang Shuo’s definition of literature, very different from the authorities’ definition of ‘literature as superstructure’.¹⁵² Wang Shuo gives a further explanation about literature, saying:

‘Literature is basically a minor skill, which anyone can amuse themselves with in their spare time, like playing chess or keeping birds, it’s just a hobby?’¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, vol. 2, p.447 (文学? 什么文学? 野生的还是人工栽培的? 多少钱一斤?)

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, vol. 2, p.518 (小说就是名家可以天马行空, 新人必须遵循规则的一种文字游戏.)

¹⁵² Mao Zedong 毛泽东, ‘Tong Aogong zongshuji Xiaji de tanhua’ 同澳共总书记夏基的谈话 (Talk with Australian Communist Party Secretary Xiaji) (1959/10/26), *Mao Zedong wenji* 毛泽东文集 (Collected Works of Mao Zedong), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe 人民出版社, 1999, vol.7 & vol. 8 (上层建筑... 也包括意识形态方面的东西)

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.515 (文学写作本是雕虫小技, 任何人茶余饭后都可以此解闷, 如同下棋遛鸟, 喜好而已...)

To consider literature as a ‘minor skill’ that everybody can enjoy during their spare time, is totally different from treating literature as the purveyor of a noble and sacred spirit, as it had been for centuries and throughout CCP revolutionary history from the early 1940s onwards.

A Literature for the People

There are many new terms used by critics in the literary field, such as ‘new realism’, ‘post-modernism’ and ‘magic-realism’ (魔幻现实主义). Wang Shuo satirizes this phenomenon by asking ‘what kind of ‘-ism’ are you playing at?’¹⁵⁴ He emphasizes that ‘people who do not play at literature do not have a future’.¹⁵⁵ This mocks the superficial nature of these ‘-isms’, and satirizes the way that the literary field is so keen on giving literary works different titles. Literary works become a formulaic ‘-ism’ plus concern about the nation. Naming ‘-isms’ has become regular practice in the whole literary field; such as ‘new realism’ 新现实主义, ‘modernism’ 现代主义, ‘post-modernism’ 后现代主义, ‘new historicism’ 新历史主义. There are no exact definitions for them; the same work can be called a different ‘-ism’ by different critics. This is driving more and more ordinary people away from literature.

Wang Shuo’s understanding of literature was not accepted by the majority of literary people at the end of 1980s. The attitude of emphasizing the entertainment side of literature earned it the label of ‘popular literature’ (tongsu wenxue) that was looked down upon by advocates of ‘serious literature’ (yansu wenxue). ‘Popular literature’

¹⁵⁴ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.2, p.451 (你们打算怎么写?.....我是说玩什么主义?)

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, vol. 2, p.486 (不玩文学的人是没有出路的.)

received very little attention from the literary world, especially the critics. By the end of the 1990s, 'serious literature' had lost its mainstream status in the cultural market. Many people started to change their concept of literature, accepting that literature should be entertaining; literature should suit the taste of the masses and attract the greatest possible number of readers. Wang Shuo drew attention to this before it became commonly accepted: 'We should never forget the ninety-nine percent (of people).'¹⁵⁶ Wang Shuo tried his best to make his stories entertaining; he became enormously popular among ordinary people. Wang Shuo clearly and strongly advocated popular literature and art, saying:

'Things which are accepted by the broad masses are the excellent and the artistic. They include comic dialogues (xiangsheng), martial art stories, sentimental films, popular songs, fashion shows, and things like that. This is how I am completely different from intellectuals, I have a common person's standard—and I'm proud of this.'¹⁵⁷

These art forms that Wang Shuo mentions are not valued by intellectuals, by 'pure literature' writers, by 'pure art' film directors and by critics pursuing a 'pure' art. They focus on expressing themselves rather than communication, and just value the reaction of a limited artistic circle and foreigners. They are not concerned whether their works, for example some of the 'avant-garde' works, would be understood by ordinary readers and audiences or not. As a result they and their works became alienated from ordinary people. Wang Shuo's stories employ 'passive resistance'¹⁵⁸ to hit the target, and send inevitable shock waves through the culture field.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.488 (什么时候也不能忘记百分之九十九)

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*, vol.4, p.467 (能被最广大的群众所接受的就是高级的, 艺术的. 比如相声, 武侠小说, 伤感电影, 流行歌曲, 时装表演诸如此类. 这就是我, 和知识分子迥然不同的, 一个俗人的标准—我为此骄傲.)

¹⁵⁸ Jin Zhensheng 金振胜, 'Hepingshi de kangzheng' 和平式的抗争 (Passive Resistance), *Tian zhong xuekan* 天中学刊 (Journal of Tian zhong), Nov. 1995, vol. 10, No. 4, pp.51-56

Satirizing the Literary World

Wang Shuo satirizes the corruption of the literary field. The story *Nothing Serious* presents a very negative image of the literary world, in which, towards the end of the story, Fang Yan, Yu Guan, Yang Zhong and Ma Qing are sued over their concept of literature. They are questioned in the court of literature, presided over by an old man. The others sitting beside the latter have no power at all: this is a typical 'one voice hall' 一言堂 situation. The young men win their case in the court of literature by flattering the old man in charge, emphasizing the political nature of the literary world. When Fang Yan (the protagonist) is given a chance to talk about his ideas on managing the literary world:

'If they give me certain powers, I will certainly make the people who listen to me prosper and those who oppose me, die! What forms of expression they use and what kind of thought and content their works have are irrelevant. If they are my mates, then I'll support them; if I have to attack them, then I'll lift them high and let them fall lightly. But for people who don't get on well with me or don't show respect to me, no matter how good they are, I'll attack them fiercely without any mercy.'¹⁵⁹

Through satirizing the literary world, Wang Shuo heavily criticized having one old man control the political system; this point reflects the reality of what happened in China in the second half of 20th century. In many respects the old man is portrayed as an open-minded person who made the right judgment in that case, although Wang Shuo appears to be satirizing the lack of democracy. This plot is very much like Wang Meng's allegory "Jianying de xizhou" 坚硬的稀粥 (Hard Porridge).¹⁶⁰ In Wang Meng's story, after all the democratic reform process, the grandfather is still in charge

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.519 (如果给我一定权力, 那我当然也顺我者昌逆我者亡! 什么表现形式什么思想内容那一概不重要. 只要哥儿们就扶持, 实在不得不打, 也是高高举起, 轻轻落下, 跟我不和的对我 不敬的再好也狠狠打击绝不留情.)

¹⁶⁰ Wang Meng 王蒙, 'Jianying de xizhou' 坚硬的稀粥 (Hard Porridge), *Wang Meng Wenji* 王蒙文集 (Collected Works of Wang Meng), vol. 4, pp.644-662

of the family. It is not surprising that Wang Meng and Wang Shuo both emphasise the same theme at almost the same time. At the end of the 1980s, before the 1989 student movement, these are oblique hints at the way Deng Xiaoping is holding power around fifteen years after the death of Chairman Mao.

Criticism of Intellectuals

Wang Shuo thinks that Mao Zedong's comments on intellectuals and workers: 'the lowly are the most intelligent, the elite are the most ignorant' 卑贱者最聪明, 高贵者最愚蠢¹⁶¹ is a rather accurate description of his own views.¹⁶² Mao's comment was used to target intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, leading to disaster for intellectuals. By the usual social criteria, Wang Shuo does not have intellectual status: he has not received higher education and he was criticized for unreasonably attacking intellectuals because of his own sense of inferiority.¹⁶³

Why did Wang Shuo criticize intellectuals? One thing that is definite is that he felt put upon by intellectuals. He has said:

'Because I did not have higher education, I walked the revolutionary road. I was bullied by intellectuals, and I could not stand it. An impetuous person like me, with an intellectual mountain over my head. Their superiority gives them access to every opening, they control the whole social value system, and using their concept of values as the standard,

¹⁶¹ Mao Zedong 毛泽东 inscribed these words during his visit to a factory in Dandong, Liaoning Province, on 18th May 1958; the factory changed its name to Factory No. 518. Geremie Barmé, 'Introduction for Shades of Mao', quoted from <http://www.morningsun.org/red/wangshuo.html>, original from Wu Jiafeng, 'Ping Wang Shuo de yidian hua', *Er shi yi shiji*, 1993, vol.12, p.144

¹⁶² Wang Shuo, 'Wang Shuo zibai' 王朔自白 (Wang Shuo's Own Words), *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 (Literature and Art Contend), 1993, vol.1, pp.65-66

¹⁶³ Ji Hongzhen 季红真, 'Wang Shuo: Chaoyue zibei' 王朔: 超越自悲 (Wang Shuo: Overcoming an inferiority complex), *Zhongshen de xiaoxiang* 众神的肖像 (Portraits of the Pantheon), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1996. p.160

make it very difficult for impatient people like us to fight against them. We can only be liberated when they are overthrown.’¹⁶⁴

There is another strong personal reason for Wang Shuo to be anti-intellectual; he had bad impressions of his middle school teachers and the intellectuals he met in life. He said:

‘They do not really understand people’s feelings, and they are overweening. This is because they think all knowledge is in their hands, where it becomes a resource for deceiving people who are weaker. In the process of growing up, I saw too much knowledge being abused, being regarded with superstition, being used to pervert human nature. This has led me to have no faith in anyone calling themselves intellectuals, to be disgusted and even hostile.’¹⁶⁵

Wang Shuo knew there were intellectuals who were worth respect, and they made him realise how narrow and prejudiced his views were. However, while one intellectual could rid Wang Shuo of his prejudice, the words and behaviour of another immediately took him back to where he was before.¹⁶⁶

Destroying the Sacred Image of the Writer

Wang Shuo criticizes the fact that writers consider themselves to be above ordinary people, he said:

‘Writers should have a sense of social responsibility! We are writers, what kind of people are writers? They are people who are superior to other people (人上人)!’¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Wang Shuo, ‘Wang Shuo zibai’ 王朔自白 (Wang Shuo’s Own Words), *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 (Literature and Art Contend), 1993, vol.1, pp.65-66

¹⁶⁵ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.107 (他们那么不通人情, 妄自尊大, 全在于他们自以为知识在手, 在他们那儿知识变成了恃强凌弱的资本. 我成长过程中看到太多知识被滥用, 被迷信, 被用来歪曲人性, 导致我对任何一个自称知识分子的人都不信任, 反感乃至仇视.)

¹⁶⁶ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p. 107

¹⁶⁷ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 2, p. 486 (要有社会责任感么! 我们是作家, 作家是什么人? 那就是人上人!)

Wang Shuo shows his rebellious spirit in his thoughts on writers and intellectuals. Writers have been sanctified (神圣化) and made more mysterious (神秘化) than other revolutionaries; they are considered to be made of special material (特殊材料制成), and are called 'the engineers of human souls' 人类灵魂的工程师 (a term coined by Gorkii). Their duty is to sculpt people's souls turning them into iron and steel. Wang Shuo pushes this analogy to extremes to make people to realize how ridiculous such propaganda sounds when it is examined.

Wang Shuo portrays a completely opposite image of the writer in the story *Nothing Serious*. Wang Shuo comments ironically that if the person does not have ability to do other work, and he just knows three to five thousands characters he can be a writer. Fang Yan, Yu Guan and Ma Qing all become writers. They play Mah-jong and poker all the time, they have a 'hooligan' way of chatting, they run away from food stalls without paying after eating. These are clearly not ideal citizens, however they all become writers. Wang Shuo's comment is:

'All the hooligans in the city have swapped jobs and become writers!'¹⁶⁸

This representation of writers plumbed the depths to shock people. Wang Shuo characterizes the writer's inner world saying:

'Is his skin thick? Is his heart black?'

'Thick and invisible, black and colourless.'

'Then be a writer, he has all the natural requirements to be a writer-hooligan.'¹⁶⁹

The image of writer is no longer of a superior person. And Wang Shuo piles on the venom:

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.* vol.2, p.457 (全市的流氓都转业当作家喽.)

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.443 ('脸厚不厚?心黑不黑?' '厚而无形,黑而无色', '那就当作家,他这条件简直就是个天生的作家坯子')

‘If my father were still alive and knew I had become a writer, he would definitely beat me to death.’¹⁷⁰

These words are all trying to bring down the profession of writer from its mysterious noble status to make it even lower than the status of ordinary people. In *The Operators* Wang Shuo expresses the same contemptuous opinion of writers:

‘Some people say there are a hundred ways of committing suicide, one of them is to get married to a writer.’¹⁷¹

Wang Shuo tries to make the point that writing is desperate, awful work looked down upon by society. Wang Shuo’s hooligan characters are just ‘verbal hooligans’ 口头流氓. The critic Deng Xiaomang thinks these characters’ inner world are very sincere, and they are more honest and upright than many people who talk about morality and idealism.¹⁷² The ‘hooligan’ language has a very strong destructive power on serious language, and reflects Wang Shuo’s rebellious spirit.

Wang Shuo went further and further in attacking the halo over writers’ heads, and revealing the contradictions of their situation. For example, when asked what the essential skills of being literary artists are, he answered:

‘Speaking, learning, provoking laughter and singing..... Writers should be interested in everything, however they cannot do everything well. Their bottoms should be heavy—so they can sit for a long time; their eyes should be sharp—so they will not miss good things; their skin should be thick—so they can investigate the dirty deeds of ancestors stretching back eight generations; fleet of foot—so they can avoid the gun muzzle in time’¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.451 (我爸要活着, 知道我当了作家, 非打死我)

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.166 (人家说自杀的办法有一百种, 其中一种就是和作家结婚.)

¹⁷² Deng Xiaomang 邓晓芒, ‘Wang Shuo: pizi de chunqing’ 王朔: 痞子的纯情 (Wang Shuo: A Hooligan’s Pure Emotion), *Linghun zhi lu -jiushi niandai wenxue de shengcun jingjie* 灵魂之旅—九十年代文学的生存境界 (Soul Tour—The Living Realm of 1990s Literature), Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1998, pp.22-45

¹⁷³ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.2, p.518 (说学逗唱. 什么都得感兴趣, 什么也干不好. 屁股得沉—坐得住; 眼睛得尖—好事拉不下; 脸皮得厚—祖宗八代的龌龊事都得打听; 腿脚得利索—及时避枪口.)

Wang Shuo is pointing out that professional writers are also ordinary human beings and have to know how to survive political or other attacks (the 'gun muzzle'). This could not be further from the controlling role concept inherent in the 'the engineer of human souls' metaphor and displays Wang Shuo's determination to tear aside the veil of smug respectability enjoyed by the writer.

A Flattering Force

Chinese intellectuals have enjoyed very high social status throughout Chinese history through their role as the backbone of the civil service. Chinese intellectuals have always been severely punished if they offend their superiors, hence they are also the weakest class in the society. Famous cases in history include in the Qin Dynasty 秦朝 (221-206 B.C.) the first emperor of China Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 'burning the books and burying the scholars' 焚书坑儒, and the Qing Dynasty 清朝 (1644-1911) Qianlong 乾隆 emperor's 'literary inquisitions' 文字狱. More recently the events of the Cultural Revolution, and the 'Hu Feng's group' 胡风集团 case, in which thousands of people around the country who were considered members were attacked and imprisoned, and Hu Feng 胡风 himself was imprisoned more than twenty years. These are all terrible examples for Chinese intellectuals. Very few people were willing to stand up and express opinions which went against official policy. Therefore, intellectuals mainly act as a group of flatterers playing up to the government.

In the story *You Are Not An Ordinary Man* Wang Shuo points to writers as a propaganda tool for the government; their mission is to let government have an easy time.¹⁷⁴ Flattery is the main work that writers and intellectuals do, they are actually a professional ‘flattery force’ 捧人队伍 for the authorities. The modernization of the country relies on this ‘flattery force.’¹⁷⁵ Wang Shuo describes the flattering work as noble and important occupation linked with the politics; he says: ‘Flattering people all day like this is more tiring than administering a small country.’¹⁷⁶ Wang hints that flattery is often used as the propaganda method of the authorities for administering the country. When there are new government policies, there will be one-sided flattery to assist in promulgating this. Wang Shuo comments ironically on China having a very large intellectual flattery force, such as writers, critics and academics, etc., who are still carrying out this work. Criticism is not welcomed, the authorities do not want to hear dissident voices.

Wang Shuo in satirizing intellectuals has hit the nail on the head. For a long time Chinese intellectuals have not had independent status; they have only been able to act as interpreters and spokespeople for the ruling ideology and they have almost no characteristics of their own. Their only function is to interpret current politics according changing needs, no matter what they believe, or what is right or wrong. They seek to make themselves look idealistic yet pursue the need for practical survival. Thus intellectuals appear hypocritical. Wang Shuo does firmly reject ultra-

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.445 (Tell people: they can't be accounted as cable if they just let themselves have a good life, they should let the government have a good time as well. 告诉人民光自个日子过好了不算本事, 让政府的日子好过了那才是好样的) (check trans)

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*, vol.4, p.453 (一个国家是否现代, 除了看它的工农业发展水平, 另一个重要的标志, 是它有没有一支职业化的, 专业水平相当高的捧人队伍.)

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*, vol.4, p.468 (这么一天拿下来比治理一个小国还累.)

leftism, which is an important reason why many intellectuals appreciate him and his works.¹⁷⁷

Hypocritical Intellectuals

Wang Shuo portrays the characters Bao Kang 宝康 and Zhao Yaoshun 赵尧舜 as examples of hypocritical intellectuals. In the story *The Operators*, Bao Kang wants a manufactured reputation, and asks the people at 'Three T' to help him win the top prize in a self-funded literary award. The morality specialist Zhao Yaoshun, a married man, is interested in young girls and admits that 'Our generation's personal lives are all tragic,'¹⁷⁸ yet insists on delivering moral education to young people. In the story *You Are Not An Ordinary Man*, Yang Zhong 杨重 teases Bao Kang saying there is a letter for him in Swedish, hinting at a Nobel Prize for literature. Bao Kang swallows the bait and hurries to get the letter and telephone the Swedish Embassy. When he is told the letter is lost, he falls down unconscious. This episode mocks Chinese writers for their hypocritical self-importance. Wang Shuo is here suggesting a vanity that is common in the literary world. A question which had dogged the Chinese people and the literary world is why no Chinese writer had ever won the Nobel Prize. This became a prime aim of the whole literary world and the nation.¹⁷⁹ Wang Meng's story

¹⁷⁷ Wu Sandong 吴三冬, 'Jue bu chengdan zeren fengxian de mingli zhuiqiu' 绝不承担责任风险的名利追求 (Pursuing Fame and Benefits Without Bearing Responsibility And Risking Danger), *Xiaoshuo pinglun* 小说评论 (Fiction Review), 1998, vol. 1 pp.85-90

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.145 (我们这代人个人生活都是悲剧)

¹⁷⁹ The Nobel 2000 literary prize was awarded to overseas Chinese Gao Xingjian 高行健 who is living in France and has a French passport, having moved away from mainland China for fifteen years. Many people were disappointed about the event because they not only have not read his works but also have not heard about him in the last 15 years.

Zhengzhong de tuijian 郑重的推荐 (Earnest Recommendation)¹⁸⁰ also satirizes this phenomenon.

Wang Shuo portrays Zhao Yaoshun's true mentality by describing his dream of the Gestapo going around people's houses and arresting them. When they do that they maintain a polite manner: they knock at the door; appreciate the paintings, make flattering comments about the cultural atmosphere of the owner's house and the beauty of his wife; and apologize before they arrest people. Wang Shuo comments acerbically on people: 'Doing dirty things but appearing highly cultured.'¹⁸¹ Intellectuals hide behind sanctimonious masks as they do outrageous things.

Intellectuals Facing the Market

In the wave of economic reforms, intellectuals still held to the old official ideology. This was a serious barrier for them in participating in the process of the development of society. In the story *Nothing Serious*, scholar Guan Hanxiong's 关汉雄 book only receives seven orders; Wang Shuo mocks him: 'For a great scholar like you, the thing which is difficult to get is solitude, isn't it?'¹⁸² Wang Shuo satirizes the plight Chinese academics find themselves in. In fact many so called academic works simply repeat what others have said, since being different and creative is not encouraged and even dangerous, and have very low academic value. 'Scholars' are not accepted by

¹⁸⁰ Wang Meng 王蒙, 'Zhengzhong de tuijian' 郑重的推荐 (Earnest Recommendation), *Dangdai* 当代 (Contemporary), vol. 6, 1995

¹⁸¹ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 4, p.494 (干的是肮脏勾当可透着相当高的文化素养)

¹⁸² Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.4, p.445 (像您们这种大学者, 难得的就是寂寞吧?)

common people and are rejected by the market economy, hence the only thing left for them is loneliness.

Wang Shuo pointed out the difficult situation intellectuals found themselves in after the market economy started. He said:

‘I feel Chinese intellectuals may be the group least able to find their position. After the wave of commercialism, it is they who feel the strongest sense of crisis, they feel more lost than any other social class.....Now under the influence of popular culture, popular stories and popular songs, their sense cultural superiority has also disappeared completely. There is really a bit of feeling of having nothing. If they do not adjust their mentality in time, I am afraid they will have difficulty finding a place in the future.’¹⁸³

Critics take different views on Wang Shuo’s criticism of intellectuals. Zhang Zhizhong commented that while Wang Shuo mocks the intellectuals’ culture, he wants to peep at it and steal from it. He is eager for high status, and uses commercial culture to reform intellectual culture.¹⁸⁴ Wang Shuo’s ambivalence is shown is the fact that most of the members of the ‘Sea Horse Film and TV Centre’ which he organised and chaired are well known young writers.

Some people were exasperated with Wang Shuo’s criticism of intellectuals. The critic Yan Lieshan 鄢烈山 said:

‘Wang Shuo is absolutely not a mad ‘dog’, he will not bite everybody he meets. He will bite the people who are worth biting, depending on whether the safety level is high or not, whether the input and output rates are high or not; these are all subject to careful calculation. The people he

¹⁸³ Wang Shuo, ‘Wang Shuo zibai’ 王朔自白 (Wang Shuo in his Own Words), *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 (Literature and Art Contend), 1993, January, vol.1, pp.65-66

¹⁸⁴ Zhang Zhizhong 张志忠, ‘Wang Shuo xianxiang: lubiao yu tianping’ 王朔现象: 路标与天平 (The Wang Shuo Phenomenon: Road Signs And Balance), *Wenyi pinglun* 文艺评论 (Literature And Art Review), 1997, vol. 5, pp.49-58

bites are all intellectuals with no fists and no courage, and alive or dead cultural figures'.¹⁸⁵

And Wang Shuo did admit that he chooses intellectuals to attack because he thinks that they are easy targets, and he chooses targets he is sure he can beat.¹⁸⁶

Wang Shuo's criticism of the holier than thou attitude and the deadly seriousness of older intellectuals is justified. It undermines the writers' unduly high opinions of themselves, has a positive effect on writers in helping them redefine themselves,¹⁸⁷ and promotes the transformation of the intellectual.

¹⁸⁵ Yan Lieshan 鄢烈山, 'Wang Shuo weishenme tongma zhishifenzi' 王朔为什么痛骂知识分子 (Why Wang Shuo Abuses Intellectuals), *Pizi yingxiong* 痞子英雄 (Hooligan Hero), 2000, p.43

¹⁸⁶ Wang Shuo used a saying: the thunder god hitting beancurd, choosing something soft to squeeze '雷公打豆腐捡软的捏' meaning he chooses the weakest people to deceive. 'Wang Shuo zibai' 王朔自白 (Wang Shuo's Own Words), *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 (Literature And Art Contend), 1993, vol.1, pp.65-66

¹⁸⁷ Zhao Liancheng 赵联成, 'Rentong yu tuoxie' 认同与妥协 (Affinity & Compromise), *Journal of Guizhou University*, Jan. 2001, vol.19, No.1, pp.70-75

b. The Gold Rush: *Playing For Thrills & Rubber Man*

Marginal People

In the South of China, particularly Guangdong province near to Hong Kong and other East Asian countries, the economy developed very fast after the Open Door policy.. Hundreds of thousands of young people came from all over China to the South to take part in the 'gold rush'. Materialism and pleasure-seeking were what young people were pursuing. Wang Shuo, based on his and his friends' experiences,¹⁸⁸ described young people smuggling goods in the South in his stories *Playing For Thrills* and *Rubber Man*.

Playing For Thrills is a 'typical' work by Wang Shuo in portraying a group of 'marginal people' 边缘人¹⁸⁹ at the beginning of the economic reforms. The story concerns a murder suspect, Fang Yan, looking for evidence that he did not kill an old mate ten years before. He travels round visiting and talking to many old mates and girlfriends to help him recall the life they had together in the South of China. Proving Fang Yan's innocence becomes an excellent vehicle to display people's lives and attitudes when they were in their early twenties. At the end of the story, Fang Yan finds that Gao Yang, who was assumed to be dead is still alive, and Fang Yan had fallen into a trap laid by his mates for a game. The plot of the story is absurd; the story

¹⁸⁸ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.102. (这些小说都是以我和我的朋友的生活为对象写的。应该说写这批小说时我感到了一些自由表达的快乐。) Wang Shuo pointed out on another occasion: 'I write all things starting from my own real example.' (我写东西都从我个人实例出发), 'Wo de xiaoshuo' 我的小说 (My Story), *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 (People's Literature), 1989, vol.3. Wang Shuo said the same thing on other occasions: 'I am the type of writer who writes about himself, who is usually called small-minded, his vision limited to his own things.' (我是写自己的那类作家, 俗称不大气, 视野局限在个人一己之私的。) *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.168

¹⁸⁹ Yang Bin 杨彬, 'Lun Wang Shuo xiaoshuo de 'bianyuanren'' 论王朔小说的 '边缘人' ('Marginal People' in Wang Shuo's Stories), *Journal of Zhongnan Ethnic University*, 1999, vol. 99, pp.103-105

is designed with a contrived beginning and ending rather than realistic ones. Wang Shuo employs a writing style which gives the story the appearance of a popular story, but within this wrapper he delivers a deeper meaning. Wang Shuo chooses the effective triangle of money, sex and youth to reflect a life which lurches between depression, elation and chaos. The story describes how different people have different memories of things that happened ten years ago. Wang Shuo jokes about the cruelty of time, filling the story with a nostalgic atmosphere. The story “Xiangpi ren” 橡皮人 (Rubber man) describes young urban people going to the South to smuggle goods, such as TV sets. They pursue every opportunity of making money, including illegal ways, and some of them end up being charged as economic criminals.

These stories challenged out-of-date concepts of money, showing clearly Wang Shuo's rejection of traditional values. In the past decades, people all had very low salaries and very little leisure time. The communist ethic of hard work and plain living prevailed, and people were enjoined to pursue a spiritual life rather than a material life. Material enjoyment was criticized as bourgeois. In Wang Shuo's stories, his main characters are the first generation of young people since socialist China was founded in 1949 to pursue money and harbour hopes of becoming millionaires overnight. They openly pursued money by any possible means, doing business on, and beyond, the border of legality, a practice described as ‘playing for thrills with shaking hands’.¹⁹⁰ Some of them doing business rely on deceiving and cheating and become criminals, such as Zhang Yansheng in *Rubber Man*; some of them degenerate into becoming prostitutes, such as Liu Yan in *Playing for Thrills*. Melinda Pirazzoli thinks:

‘The mafia and prostitution are topics that have been explored in several works of fiction over the last two or three years (1996). The most

¹⁹⁰ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 2, p. 424 (麻着爪玩回心跳)

charismatic writer in this field is Wang Shuo, the leading star of the young generation of contemporary fiction writers.¹⁹¹

Both of these stories use a first person narrator as protagonist. Wang Shuo is one of the characters he portrays; he reflects the views of young urbanites who are strongly dissatisfied with society, and do not want to live the same lives as the older generation. These young urbanites cannot see any meaning in life; the ideals of communism in which they have been educated are unrealizable in the near future. They want to use the sense of satisfaction which material goods bring to their sensory organs to fill this emptiness. They want wealth to achieve more social mobility in a system dominated by bureaucracy. And yet many ended up betrayed by their dreams, some bewildered and corrupted by their quest for materialism and money. Their lives were wasted by oscillation between pursuing money and spending it extravagantly, deceiving and being deceived. What they had left were the memories of past indulgences.

The critic Jiao Tong criticized Wang Shuo's character portrayal. He said:

'Although the group of people under Wang Shuo's pen who went to extremes in trying to overthrow tradition, finally established their existence through their fierce fight with tradition, yet they became just meaningless symbols. They have nothing but their mode of existence. Therefore, their self-knowledge is limited to a stubborn insistence. They are not capable of real introspection and affirmation of their own ideology.....Then, the characters under Wang Shuo's pen come to a dead end—with an abyss behind and a precipice in front.'¹⁹²

These stories are full of social commentary reflecting society and the mentality of the people at that time, and showing understanding of the dawn of today's market

¹⁹¹ Melinda Pirazzoli, 'The Free-Market Economy and Contemporary Chinese Literature', *World Literature Today*, 1996, vol.2, pp.301-310

¹⁹² Jiao Tong 焦桐, 'Wang Shuo: yiwusuoyou de ganga' 王朔:一无所有的尴尬 (Wang Shuo: The Embarrassment of Having Nothing), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 (Review of Contemporary Writers), 1993, vol. 2, pp.94-99

economy. The critic Lei Da praised the social insights of these stories by Wang Shuo saying:

‘The social insights in Wang Shuo’s stories far outweigh the value of the stories themselves. He offers a new social angle and a new social mentality. I should say that it is not primarily the artistry of his stories that made him successful, but the living environment, attitude towards life and mental characteristics of the characters in his stories that brought him success.’¹⁹³

This was the lifestyle of new groups of characters who did not exist in traditional socialist society. These young people not only stuck out because of their attitude but also because of their lifestyle. ‘Tiaokan’ is not only a style of language, but essentially an attitude, a type of behaviour or a lifestyle. It is ironic in language, and also ironic in life.¹⁹⁴

The Quest for Sex and Women

Wang Shuo explored the reality of his characters directly and brutally in their quest for women and sex. In the story *Playing For Thrills* Wang Shuo deliberately emphasizes that the protagonist Fang Yan 方言 has sexual relationships with many girls, including a married woman Zhang Li 张莉, Li Jiangyun 李江云 and Ling Yu 凌瑜. Wang Shuo describes Fang Yan’s casual sex life as an ordinary part of everyday existence, of no surprise to young people in Fang Yan’s group; Wu Pengzi 吴胖子 and Wang Ruohai 汪若海 behave in much the same way. And these people often

¹⁹³ Lei Da 雷达, ‘Lun Wang Shuo xianxiang’ 论王朔现象 (On the Wang Shuo Phenomenon), *Zuojia* 作家 (Writer), 1989, vol. 3, pp.73-77 (王朔小说的社会认识意义远远超过了他的小说本身的价值. 他提供了一种新的社会视角和一种最新的社会心态. 应该说, 主要不是他小说的艺术性使他成功了, 而是他小说中人物的生存境遇, 生活态度和精神特征使他们成功了.)

¹⁹⁴ Wang Yichuan 王一川, ‘Yuyan shenhua de zhongjie’ 语言神话的终结 (The End of the Language Fairytale), *Xuexi yu tansuo* 学习与探索 (Study and Exploration), 1999, vol. 3, pp.111-116

boast of their success with women and money.¹⁹⁵ This is polar opposite to the orthodox revolutionary attitude towards women and sex in past decades.

Here girls are openly described as victims of sex crimes; Li Jiangyun is seduced by her music teacher when she is still a primary school student, and then becomes the sexual property of her father; Liu Yan 刘炎 degenerates into the role of prostitute because of bad sexual encounters; Ling Yu is suffering from a serious sexual disease. These terrible sexual experiences of girls expose a dark side of society rarely seen in literary works of the 1980s. Orthodox intellectuals could not accept nor understand this; most of them were divorced from any contact with young people at bottom of society.

Since male characters in the story treat sex with girls as a game, it is not surprising that girls take a similar attitude. These include the 'romantic girl—lover of all of us, Qiaoqiao' 风流女子—我们大家的情妇乔乔, and 'public property Xia Hong' 公共财产夏红. Wang Shuo describes these young people seated around a dinner table:

'Opposite me are Gao Jin and Xu Xun, on my right hand is Wang Ruohai and a romantic girl—lover of all of us, Qiaoqiao, beside me is another public property, Xia Hong, to the left of Xia Hong is Gao Yang; Gao Yang holds one of Xia Hong's hands, beside Gao Yang.....',¹⁹⁶

The images of these girls are not what readers, especially intellectuals, expected. They conflict with the traditional image of a woman as a person who should pay careful attention to morality. They should maintain their loyalty and chastity no matter what

¹⁹⁵ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.2 p.233

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p.232

men do to them, this is the Confucian male-centred view of woman.¹⁹⁷ Socialist China strictly promulgated a 'one husband and one wife' marriage law. However, the traditional idea of girls keeping their virginity until marriage was still predominant. If they did not remain virgins, girls would feel ashamed and no man would want to marry them.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, there were many books exposing Chinese leaders' private lives, including Mao Zedong 毛泽东. Their images of marital fidelity established as propaganda models for decades suddenly collapsed. Young people no longer believed in these models of morality. It was modern Western 'sexual liberation' that influenced Chinese young people. They were tired of the decades of asceticism and rejected traditional models of love, sex and marriage. Having multiple sexual partners became part of rebellious young people's pursuit of the bourgeois lifestyle, especially men. When Wang Shuo's story *Playing For Thrills* described such attitudes in 1989, it was really shocking, because it broke so many taboos which other writers had kept to. Sex as a topic in China was always very restricted. Another writer of serious literature who tried to break into this forbidden area was Jia Pingwa 贾平凹. His novel *Fei du* 废都 (Ruined City), published in 1993, caused a shocked reaction by portraying the degeneration of intellectuals, especially writers on the matter of sex. The book was banned by the authorities soon after it was published.

Wang Shuo avowed that playing with sex can result tragedy and destroy people's lives. As he describes in the story *Half Seawater Half Fire*. A female university

¹⁹⁷ San gang wu chang 三纲五常, the traditional ethics promoted throughout Chinese history were the three cardinal guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife), and the five constant virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity).

student, Wu Di, falls in love with Zhang Ming who plays on her emotions and then abandons her. Wu Di degenerates into criminal activities, and joins a gang which tries to corrupt people through sex and defraud them of money. When the gangs' behaviour is revealed by the police, Wu Di commits suicide before being caught.

Sex and marriage are portrayed as tools for making money and getting a foreign passport. In the story *Floating Above the Sea* the female character Liu Hualing marries a foreigner and then divorces him after she got money and a foreign passport. Afterwards social opprobrium causes her to feel guilty, and she drinks excessively at a dinner to rid herself of the pangs of guilt.¹⁹⁸

Money is treated as more important than love by these young people. In the story *Playing For Thrills*, Feng Xiaogang falls in love with Li Jiangyun and wants to marry her. Li Jiangyun bluntly tells Feng Xiaogang to go out and make some money; she would only marry somebody with money, and was not willing to consider his present financial state. Feng Xiaogang swears that he will make lots of money and marry her; however he is naïve and cannot understand the dirty tricks played by other people over money. Feng Xiaogang's dreams of making money and marriage with the girl he loves are broken. Traumatic changes brought about by sex, money and love are clearly depicted as negative influences on people's lives.

Wang Shuo does not describe sexual acts directly, but there are lots of hints about people's relationships. Sex becomes meaningless behaviour; there is no emotion and

¹⁹⁸ Wang Shuo 王朔, 'Fu chu haimian' 浮出海面 (Floating above the Sea), *Wang Shuo wenji* 王朔文集 (The Collected Works of Wang Shuo), Kunming: Yunnan renming chubanshe 云南人民出版社, 2002, pp. 279-280

no restraint. The attitude of his stories is still that of 'serious literature' rather than 'popular literature' (tongsu). Sexual activity in popular stories may be a topic for detailed description. Wang Shuo claims that he has serious attitude towards sex in his works. He said:

'I am a person with moral principles. Sex is a common and healthy thing. I cannot get used to the many works with abnormal descriptions. That is just wishful thinking. You don't need to make a big thing about sex, it has subtle influence on people. If you want to write about sex, you should be serious, it is not necessary to use it as seasoning. There are many elements in my story that can move readers, I do not need to use sex to stimulate them.'¹⁹⁹

However, Wang Shuo could not avoid these stories bringing him a reputation for 'hooligan literature' (pizi wenxue).

The Quest for True Love

The girls in *Playing For Thrills* such as Li Jiangyun, Liu Yan and Ling Yu are not like the girls in Wang Shuo's love stories, such as Wang Mei and Yu Jing. The latter are very pure and simple girls with traditional ideas on love and marriage. However, these girls with bad sexual experiences are portrayed as just the same as other people in their pursuit of true love in their lives.

The quest for true love parallels the issues of sex throughout the whole story. Fang Yan hears a woman who keeps dialing a telephone which never gets through, and she murmurs all the time: I love you. Wherever the woman has been there is a smell of violets. The smell of the violet perfume and the murmuring of 'I love you' appear constantly in Fang Yan's mind, reminding him of a true love who disappeared and

¹⁹⁹ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.38 (我是有道德原则的人. 性, 是一件普通而健康的事. 我不习惯许多文学作品中那种变态的描写. 那完全是想当然. 对性, 不必大作文章, 它对人的影响非常微妙. 要写就得严肃地写, 拿它作佐料没必要. 我的小说调动人情绪的因素很多, 根本用不着用性刺激读者.)

whom he cannot exactly remember. Was she Bai Shan, Ling Yu or Li Jiangyun? The jigsaw pieces of his memory reflect his confusion over gaining and losing love, and the promiscuous love lives of these young people.

The images of the relationship between Fang Yan and the woman are pure at the beginning. He often sees Ling Yu in his dream, talks with her and displays a pure love. He says:

‘Let’s make an effort to have a beautiful dream.’

Ling Yu answered: ‘Just two of us, we shall not allow other people to get into our dream.’

‘Yes’ I avowed, ‘We have the right to govern our dreams.’²⁰⁰

That is their ideal in life, but the ideal is a dream which cannot come true.

There was a time when Fang Yan was in love, which others remember but Fang Yan does not admit to. Wang Ruohai recalled:

‘At that time you were in love, desperately in love, every day going out early and getting back late, talking to yourself, your face glowed with love, and you made every effort to keep this secret from us, swearing and vowing that you were just having a bit of fun. In fact you were head over heels and took us all for fools.’²⁰¹

Fang Yan could not remember, as Wang Ruohai described the situation he had been in:

‘It was a classic case; you wrote love letters every day, talking of the stars in the sky and every other kind of thing in the world to express your feelings; those beautiful expressions of your feelings could move people to death.’²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.2, p.437 (他说: ‘让我们努力做个美梦,’ 凌瑜回答: ‘就我们俩, 我们不让别人走进我们梦里.’ ‘不让’ 我保证说, ‘我们有权支配我们的梦.’)

²⁰¹ *ibid.*, vol.2, pp.268-269 (当时你在谈恋爱, 爱的死去活来, 每天早出晚归自言自语爱得脸蛋红扑扑的, 还一个劲儿向我们保密赌咒发誓只是玩玩, 其实是动了情全当别人是傻子.)

²⁰² *ibid.*, vol.2, pp.268-269 (‘而且你还特古典, 每天写情书什么的, 经常提一些天上的星星人间万物之类的借物咏志, 那美好的抒情能麻死个人.’)

Falling in love is a temporary beautiful state from the past. The reality is brutal and painful. Fang Yan's feelings grow cold and heartless; he splits up with the girl. They 'degenerate' on the issue of sex which becomes nothing but a game. The story reveals a conflict between the dream of true love and the confused reality of a sexual relationship. The broken dream shrouds the story. Is it important to have true love? Or does it not matter? The question of true love revolves around in Fang Yan's head unanswered.

In *Rubber Man*, the girl Li Bailing 李白铃, who is financially very capable shouts at 'me':

'I love you, can't you understand?' She was shaking me, 'I'm not deceiving you. I'm not lying. Do you want that money? I give it all to you or throw it away. You, look at me, have a good look at me! I am not that Li Bailing any more, I am just a woman, a woman who really loves you and is longing for your love!'²⁰³

There is no response to the call for love. Money is the only pursuit in life, people do not believe in true love any more, a fact that is really tragic.

The dreams of pursuing true love all come to grief. Playing at sex and love finally results in retribution, a life of emptiness. Wang Shuo uses one sentence to draw a conclusion for these young people. He says: 'The period of youth is like a river, as it flows it becomes muddy water.'²⁰⁴ Youth has gone, the story is the record of these young people's lives, a story of nostalgia and a sense of loss.

²⁰³ *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp.103-104

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.291 (青春的岁月像条河, 流着流着就成浑汤了)

Traditional Stories

Wang Shuo is willing to say things considered outrageous about money and sex. At the time of writing *Playing For Thrills*, Wang Shuo was already famous, and literary magazine editors were willing to publish almost anything he wanted to write; not needing to worry about public acceptability, Wang was even less restrained than before. He carried out a full frontal assault on conservative society by writing about real life.

Because modernism from the West was fashionable in China in the late 1980s, some people put Wang Shuo down as a modernist or label him post-modern. Wang Shuo's stories do not have much connection with any ism, and the passing tides of the literary field. They are very much homemade one-off stories.²⁰⁵ Although Wang Shuo drew lessons from Western writers such as Joseph Heller, the spirit, mindset and society of his stories are all totally Chinese.

The form of Wang Shuo's stories is strongly traditional in flavour; they are not particularly modern in plot and content. Wang Shuo wants readers to understand his stories easily. With 'avant-garde' works, many people could not understand the stories; they were a kind of experiment of modern literary expression, but one which lost many readers. Wang Shuo has different views on story writing. He said:

'A story should still be a story; it should allow people to read it; it still needs those elements which cannot be separated from tradition.'²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Lei Da 雷达, 'Lun Wang Shuo xianxiang' 论王朔现象 (On the Wang Shuo Phenomenon), *Zuojia* 作家 (Writer), 1989, vol. 3, pp.73-77

²⁰⁶ Wang Shuo, 'Wo de xiaoshuo' 我的小说 (My Stories), *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 (People's Literature), vol.3, 1989, p.108

Wang Shuo also points out that 'to a certain extent, my stories are closer to the traditional story.'²⁰⁷

The critic He Zhongming thinks that learning from the traditional story has made for Wang Shuo's success.²⁰⁸ Apart from drawing lessons from traditional literary forms, Wang Shuo's works in their traditionalized form and folksy language can be traced to the same origin as the stories of Lao She 老舍 and Zhao Shuli 赵树理, taking inspiration from their real lives and insisting on traditional aesthetic values. Making the plot coherent and entertaining is a traditional aesthetic value. *Playing for Thrills* and *Rubber man* are both traditional stories in their story structure and content.

Wang Shuo talked about writing *Playing for Thrills*, which seems to go against the traditional idea of letting the reader easily understand the story; he felt dissatisfied with his method of writing—worried that the use of flashback may confuse people.²⁰⁹ Wang Shuo gave an honest review of the plot development in *Playing For Thrills*. He considered solving the 'murder case' was down to the common sense of the characters. He planned to write *Playing For Thrills* as a murder story, however all the clues had been mixed up, the murder story could not be simply retold; he felt in a dilemma over the plot because of the nature of the characters whose mental state made murder impossible. This prevented him from writing a normal murder story.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*

²⁰⁸ He Zhongming 贺仲明, 'Wenhua bianyuanren' de yuandui yu ganga '文化边缘人'的怨怼与尴尬 (The resentment and embarrassment of the 'Culturally Marginal People'), *Zhongzhou xuekan* 中州学刊 (*Zhongzhou Journal*), 1998, vol. 6, pp.91-99

²⁰⁹ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.53

²¹⁰ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, pp.53-54 (我并不是自觉地用有价值的去表现无价值的。<玩的就是心跳> 就是一个凶杀故事。这个凶杀故事不能再现, 所有的线索都被搞乱了。但是, 写到最后, 不能自圆其说了。这些人活的太潇洒了。原来还想写成因奸杀人或因财杀人。但是他们这种精神状态不可能为这么点儿事儿杀人, 钱和女人已不算事。写到最后我都没辙了, 无法为这些人设置一个因

However, *Playing For Thrills* successfully portrayed its main content: the attitudes to life and the life styles of the protagonists. The readers do not really care about solving the murder case in the story; they are attracted by its main content. The critic Chen Sihe pointed out:

‘In fact, readers are more interested in the bewildering illusions and the narrative pattern set out in the story than seeking some result. In other words, the interest in the chosen the way of life of Fang Yan and his group far exceeds the interest in the murder case.’²¹¹

From Wang Shuo’s own admissions about the structural arrangement of plots we can see there are shortcomings in Wang Shuo’s story writing, such as sloppiness, and idiosyncrasy. His stories were criticized as ‘rather rough’ and ‘not refined’. He is sometimes over-reliant on trusting to his talent, a habit which detracts from the possibilities of his art. He exaggerates and shows off; this affects his works and prevents them reaching a higher artistic level.²¹² *Playing for Thrills* was the first of Wang Shuo’s stories to be translated into English. It was published in 1997 in America. It essentially chronicles the changes in young people’s attitudes to life in the dramatically developing society.

c. The Absurd: *Please Don’t Call Me Human*

The novel *Please Don’t Call Me Human* was sent out for publication by Wang Shuo in February 1989 before the democratic movement failed in China, hence its

果关系。憋了很长时间。最后一想，得了，干脆玩的就是心跳吧，咱不为什么了，什么都不为了。……写跑了。所以形成目前这种捉摸不定的效果。）

²¹¹ Chen Sihe 陈思和, ‘Heise de tuifei’ 黑色的颓废 (‘Black Decadence’), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 (Contemporary Writer Review), vol. 5, 1989, pp.33-40

²¹² Zhang Daxiang 张德祥, ‘Shidian xiayi zhihou—Wang Shuo wenxue guannian toushi’ 视点下移之后—王朔文学观念透视 (After Lowering the Point of View—Perspectives on Wang Shuo’s Literary Concepts), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 (Contemporary Writer Review), 1993, vol. 3, pp.58-65

substantial level of political satire went without being banned. There is heavy use of irony in this work, as in much of Wang Shuo's fiction. Irony has been described as one of the four master tropes and as "juxtaposing appearance and reality".²¹³ Irony does not have to be satirical, but in Wang Shuo's hands, it usually is. Irony is widely used for humorous effect, and in a politically sensitive environment it also offers a way of cloaking critical comment in an acceptable guise where it would not be tolerated as direct criticism. Wang Shuo believes his use of irony here reaches the highest level (登峰造极) among his 'tiaokan' stories.²¹⁴ *Please Don't Call Me Human* was originally a screen play produced as a group work, with Zhang Yimou, Wang Shuo and a few others discussing the plot for a week, although they did not make it into a film in the end.²¹⁵ The English translation was published in 1999 in America.

It is a surreal story describing a group of people who set up an organization called 'quanzong' 全总. They plan to manipulate people by appealing to their patriotism, ostensibly for the honour of China but really in order to gain financial benefits. By showing a video of Chinese boxers (yellow men) being beaten by a French boxer (a white man) in an international competition, the Quanzong organization motivates peasant enterprises and individual businessmen to donate funds to them. They then happen to select Tang Yuanbao 唐元豹, regarded as heir to the 'big dream school of boxing' 大梦拳 of the Boxers (义和团 Yihetuan) patriotic movement of 1900. The Quanzong organization uses all sorts of ways of training and educating Tang Yuanbao as a national hero to win the fight with the French boxer. The masses support them, including Tang's family and neighbours. The ridiculous thing is that the white man

²¹³ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.73

²¹⁴ Wang Shuo, *I am Wang Shuo*, p.31

²¹⁵ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.54

commits suicide because he has heard all the people in China want to fight with him. What is even more ridiculous is that the Quanzong organization conceals this fact to protect their interests. They manipulate the compliant Tang Yuanbao and have him castrated so that he can take part in women's events. In the end Tang Yuanbao takes part in a world endurance competition in Japan, where he tears off his face and wins the gold medal.

Satire on Nationalism

The story is a social and political allegory in which people's high ideals are manipulated by scheming individuals for their own personal ends. Concepts such as nationalism and loyalty are used to trick people into sacrificing their own interests by the unscrupulous. People are willing to sacrifice themselves in answer to the call of nationalism. 'Nationalism has been an extremely powerful theme in modern Chinese history.'²¹⁶ The humiliations of foreign invasions of last hundred years of modern Chinese history made nationalism an extremely powerful tool to manipulate people into doing whatever those in power wanted. The Chinese Communist Party is a past master at this. From Chairman Mao's announcement that 'Chinese people have stood up' (中国人民站起来了) at the founding ceremony of the PRC, the emphasis was always that the Chinese people are no longer kneeling as the slaves of the foreign invaders. The propaganda slogan: 'the backward will be beaten' 落后就要挨打 is remembered by every citizen, and the 'dream of a prosperous and powerful country' 强国梦 still motivates Chinese people.

²¹⁶ Wang Huazhi, *Problematizing The Nation: The 'Wang Shuo Phenomenon' and Contemporary Chinese Culture*, United States: UMI Company, p. 8

Geremie Barmé suggests that 'the story would best be seen in the light of broader cultural issues', and particularly the Chinese national character.²¹⁷ Howard Goldblatt, the translator of *Please Don't Call Me Human*, pointed to national character in the issue of 'face'. He said:

'Face. Sometimes rendered as 'shame', it is more widely interpreted as 'honour,' 'prestige,' or 'reputation.' For Chinese, individually and collectively, a loss of face is to be avoided at all costs. And saving face is one of the engines that drive Chinese society.'²¹⁸

The ideal of overturning the old image of China and the Chinese in foreigners' eyes is a goal of many Chinese. Reference to China as the 'sick man of East Asia' (东亚病夫) is an epithet that Chinese found especially hurtful. Boxing, like any other sport, is never just sport in China, it is always closely linked to politics, and now to the economy. This was initially seen in 'ping pong diplomacy' 乒乓外交 and latterly in 'Olympics fever'. Sport has been used as a tool to win back past glories. The quest for gold medals in international competitions is a quest for national pride, and people are willing to make enormous sacrifices to achieve that great goal.

The more people know about the West, the more the Chinese people and the government feel anxiety over China's present material backwardness, military weakness and political corruption. People really do feel ashamed of the situation of China compared with developed Western countries. Pride in "5,000 years of civilization" is simply not enough for today's China. Blind nationalism and anxiety over backwardness has made Chinese people willing to make any sacrifice. There are many national patriotic heroes and heroines as models, such as Yue Fei 岳飞 (1103-

²¹⁷ Geremie Barmé, 'Wang Shuo and Liumang ('Hooligan') Culture', *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, Volume O (sic), Issue 28 (Jul., 1992), pp.23-64

²¹⁸ Howard Goldblatt, 'Translator's Note', *Please Don't Call Me Human*, Herts: No Exit Press, 2000



1142) and Liu Hulan 刘胡兰 (1932-1947). Tang Yuanbao is willing to make any sacrifice for the nation's glorious ideal. He is emasculated and finally literally loses his face. Tang Yuanbao's family and neighbours in Tanzi 坛子 alley have their property confiscated and destroyed.

The only remedy they come up with is to pray for justice from an old man who represents their Saviour. The Saviour however does nothing except questions them and calls for deep thought:

'Blind and credulous people. Why do not you learn how to use your own brains to think?'²¹⁹

In the story, there is no introspection or attempt on the part of the people to find the source of the problems; they put their lives and the nation's future totally in the hands of the 'Saviour'. The people remain credulous and in danger of further manipulation by anyone playing the nationalist card.

Wang Shuo's equivocal attitude towards the Chinese people can also be found in *The Operators*:

'The Chinese common people are really the best common people in the world, they actually do not have any over-extravagant expectations.'²²⁰

He celebrates the Chinese people's great ability to endure suffering until it reaches extreme levels; then the only outcome is violent revolution, a feature of Chinese history.

²¹⁹ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 3, p.178 (盲目, 轻信的人们啊, 为什么不学会用自己的脑子想问题呢?)

²²⁰ *ibid.*, vol. 2, p.130 (中国的老百姓真是世界上最好的老百姓, 他们其实并没有什么过奢的要求。)



Satirizing Politics

The organization which deceives people is called the ‘national people’s motivation committee’ (Quanguo renmin zongdongyuan weiyuanhui 全国人民总动员委员会), abbreviated to ‘quanzong’ 全总. Thus it is the same as, or similar to, other national and governmental organizations such as the National General Union (Quanguo zonggonghui 全国总工会), also abbreviated to Quanzong 全总, and national military departments, including the General Politics Department 总政 (治部), General Consultation Department 总参 (谋部) and General Logistics Department 总后 (勤部); these are all highest level state organizations in China. Using the name of Quanzong to refer to a private organization consisting of a small group of people in the story is full of ironical meaning and for Chinese conjures up a formal and powerful organization, which may be carrying out governmental duties.

In describing how the Quanzong provides a ridiculous training schedule for Tang Yuanbao, the novel reviews revolutionary history throughout the century, especially the histories of the KMT and CCP. By comparing what happened during the KMT’s period in power and the CCP’s period in power, Wang Shuo explores and satirizes both groups’ political mistakes.

The CCP called for class struggle and liberation of the people from under the control of the KMT from the 1920s to the 1940s. The question of ‘why should we have class struggle in China?’ is answered with ‘Because only by carrying out class struggle can

we have a better life.’²²¹ To give everybody a better life was the aim of CCP revolution, yet somehow after they gained power that aim of revolution was forgotten. Yet, class struggle turned from the means into the goal, as it became a permanent and very destructive feature of every person’s daily life.

The treatment Tang Yuanbao received recalls that meted out to CCP prisoners by the KMT in many books and films: Quanzong arranged for the wizard Zhang Daxian to extract the ghost from Tang Yuanbao; they tied him to a branch and tortured him, then Tang Yuanbao passed out and ended up in hospital; they pulled out his nails; they burned him with a red hot poker, and poured salt water in his wounds, and so on. This also makes the reader think about people who are labelled as rightists or made other political mistakes and suffered vicious physical and mental abuse during political campaigns.

Wang Shuo is shocking in his willingness to draw comparisons between the KMT and the present CCP era on the issue of freedom of speech. Zhao Yuhang, the director of Quanzong says:

‘I condemned the KMT more viciously than you in the KMT period, and at that time some people who condemned them even got killed.’²²²

The KMT killed many people who spoke out publicly against them. A famous case is Wen Yiduo 闻一多, a poet and professor of Tsinghua University who was murdered by KMT special agents after he made a public speech criticizing the KMT. This became a byword for KMT tyranny. However, the CCP had little to commend itself

²²¹ *ibid.*, vol. 3, p.54 (‘为什么要在中国进行阶级斗争.’ 回答是: ‘因为只有进行阶级斗争, 我们才能过上好日子。’)

²²² *ibid.*, vol. 3, p.74. (国民党时代我骂得比你还凶—那里骂人还有要杀头的咧)

for in this respect. Zhao Yuhang reminded people in his group: 'We should not destroy a person because of one sentence.'²²³ Yet, that was precisely what happened during the many political movements. Because of a single sentence, an article, a story or a poem many people were publicly criticized; they lost their positions in their work unit; some were treated as class enemies; some were beaten and public humiliated, and even put in prisons or labour camps. For example Wang Meng, because of his short story *The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department* was labelled a rightist, and sent to a labour camp. The policy of both parties was to intimidate people into not saying anything which conflicted with official propaganda.

Wang Shuo satirizes the utopian claims of political parties. Before Tang Yuanbao was castrated he was persuaded to escape to a Liberated Area²²⁴, which is described as a heaven on earth. He does not believe it, and asks: 'From what you say, it must be Pure Land (jingtú 淨土) on earth?'²²⁵ Although Yan'an was the capital of the Liberated Areas, it was full of factional struggles and people suffering. These included the start of the rectification movement (zhengfeng yundong 整风运动) system and the killing of the writer Wang Shiwei 王实味 for his writings which were critical of the CCP.²²⁶

'How long can the red flag be carried?'²²⁷ was the question asked when people doubted how long the CCP, as a small weak force could hold out in Yan'an against

²²³ *ibid.*, vol. 3, p.74 (不要因为一句话一个人毁掉了.)

²²⁴ Jiefangqu 解放区 was the name of the 'liberated areas' where the CCP were in power before 1937-1949 and which attracted thousands of young people who believed the communist propaganda and went there to join the CCP in its struggle with the KMT.

²²⁵ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.3, p.154

²²⁶ Wang Shiwei 王实味 was posthumously exonerated in the 1990s. Huang Changyong 黄昌勇, 'Ye baihehua' de qianqianhouhou <野百合花>的前前后后 (The Ins and Outs of 'Wild Lily'), 2000, vol. 3, pp.42-58, quoted from Zhongguo xueshu qikan wang 中国学术期刊网 www.cnki.net

²²⁷ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.3, p.75 (红旗到底能打多久?)

the powerful forces of the KMT and the Japanese. In that case the CCP won the battle and founded the PRC. But after thirty years in power, the question of 'How long can the red flag be carried?' was again being asked of the CCP after the Cultural Revolution. 'The red flag' is the symbol of CCP authority and its roots in communist ideology. The discovery that after the years of enormous suffering the people were still living in very deprived political and economic circumstance, and that China was conspicuously lagging further behind Western capitalism countries, left people very suspicious of the socialist system and the CCP government. They were well accustomed to the culture of 'scapegoatism' as the solution to the failure of every political movement. Wang Shuo captures this mood of cynicism in having Tang Yuanbao's father Tang Guotao made the scapegoat who is condemned to take responsibility for defeat in the Boxer movement.²²⁸

Wang Shuo has arranged for these serious ideological questions to emerge in his ridiculous plots in order to avoid criticizing the authorities directly. The critic Deng Xiaomang alludes to Wang Shuo's way of criticizing politics in his novels through the fable of The Emperor's New Clothes. He says:

'Wang Shuo's works are full of children who see the emperor has no clothes and speak out. These people really are doing this; they cunningly and treacherously take advantage of the emperor and the ignorant masses to profit themselves. They are like the crafty old scoundrel of a tailor who made 'new cloth' for the emperor.'²²⁹

Wang Shuo creates a humorous atmosphere but behind this there is serious meaning. As one critic has commented, he uses a 'comedy in form, tragedy in spirit'

²²⁸ *ibid.*, vol.3, p.170 (我们现在缺一个对轰轰烈烈的义和团运动失败负责的人.)

²²⁹ Deng Xiaomang 邓晓芒, 'Wang Shuo: A Hooligan's Pure Emotion' 王朔: 痞子的纯情, *Soul Tour—The Living Realm of 1990s Literature* 灵魂之旅—九十年代文学的生存境界, Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1998, pp.22-45

approach.²³⁰ By satirizing what has happened in China throughout history, he highlights the way the same mistakes happen again and again, raising people's political awareness to this national tragedy.

This story is the most biting political satire of all Wang Shuo's stories; it is no coincidence that it was written and published in the freest period of contemporary China's history. After the events of 1989, the authorities' policies of building 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and the demand for stability overwhelmed everything else, and 'reforming and opening up' no longer included 'liberal' literary language and elite culture.²³¹

Criticism of Inhuman Expectations and Treatment

After joining the Quanzong organization, Tang Yuanbao experiences inhuman treatment of epic proportions. He has to make a vow when he joins the organization, by lifting his left fist and swearing an oath. This is very much like the swearing in ceremony for joining the CCP as portrayed in revolutionary stories and films. The oath for joining the organization includes the following words:

'obey the organization, sacrifice myself...from now on, apart from the organization I have no other relatives...my head can be cut, my blood can be shed...I will climb a mountain of knives, jump into a wok of burning oil ...'²³²

²³⁰ Mo Luo 摩罗, 'Comedy in Form and Tragedy in Spirit' 喜剧姿态与悲剧精神, *Shehui kexue luntan* 社会科学论坛 (Social Science Forum), 2002, vol. 1, pp.58-66

²³¹ Cai Shilian 蔡世连, 'Taoyi chenlun zhengjiu—jiushi niandai wentan geju he zouxiang' 逃逸.沉沦.拯救—九十年代文坛格局和走向 (Escape, Depravity, Rescue—The Structure and Direction of the Literary World in the 1990s), *Qi Lu xuekan* 齐鲁学刊 (Qi Lu Journal), 1998, vol. 1, pp.120-124

²³² Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 3, p.45

These are all inhuman expectations of people, and yet these words are often used to describe CCP members, especially their heroic spirit of courage and sacrifice. The slogan the ‘communist is forged from iron and steel’ 共产党人是钢铁炼成的 comes from the Soviet Russian story ‘How the Iron and Steel Are Forged’ 钢铁是怎样炼成的 which was heavily promoted. Members of the CCP were expected to surpass ordinary people both physically and mentally; the hardships they have is also extraordinary, as described in the metaphor of ‘climbing a mountain of knives, falling in a wok of burning oil’.

After swearing the oath to join the organization, Tang Yuanbao says:

‘From now on we are not human beings any more — not ordinary human beings any more.’²³³

There are many deified heroes and heroines for people to emulate, such as Dong Cunrui 董存瑞 who sacrificed himself by supporting a bomb with his own body to destroy an enemy-held bridge during the civil war, and Huang Jiguang 黄继光 who used his body to block the enemy’s bullets during the Korean war.

Tang Yuanbao too is not expected to be an ordinary human being after he joins the organization, and he is praised as the foremost man of all the Chinese.²³⁴ Tang Yuanbao is deified as a superhuman hero during his performance for the shareholders: he uses his fist to hit a tank, then smoke comes out of tank, and soldiers emerge from it and run away; one tank drives over Tang Yuanbao’s body, but it is the tank that turns over, and Tang Yuanbao rises, shaking off the dust and stands up

²³³ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 3, p.45 (元豹说: ‘...从今后咱们就...就...不是人了—不是一般人了。’)

²³⁴ *ibid.*, vol. 3, p.46 (中国的头号男子汉)

unharméd; Tang Yuanbao blows on a fire in a house and the fire dies out; he walks through a wall and leaves a hole in the wall. When Tang Yuanbao appears on TV he is accepted as a national hero by the masses, and people march on the streets to express their hope that Tang Yuanbao can earn glory for the country. Wang Shuo's way of portraying Tang Yuanbao is really to satirize the way exaggerated expectations can reach preposterous levels.

Wang Shuo further emphasises that the hero Tang Yuanbao is no longer human through ridiculous scenes. The Quanzong organization arranges a fundraiser, a freak-show in fact, displaying Tang Yuanbao together with a sheep with five legs, a chicken with three legs, a pig with horns on its head and a snake with two heads.

Paragons of extreme self-sacrifice are not confined to the special conditions of war-time. Even in peace time the communist hero is expected to be willing to make the supreme sacrifice, often for what would appear, in most cultures, to be banal reasons. Lei Feng 雷锋, whole-heartedly worked for people, and sacrificed his life to save another's, according to the propaganda material. Jiao Yulu 焦裕禄, worked endlessly for the public good but left one of his children to die of starvation and he himself dies of cancer. Both Lei and Jiao are still great models for today's CCP members. As a hero, Tang Yuanbao has swallowed all the propaganda and is willing to make any self-sacrifice and do whatever the organization expects him to do; he even agrees to be castrated; this is regarded as the most traumatic and shameful fate a Chinese man can endure.

At the end of the story, Tang Yuanbao attends a 'World Endurance Competition' held in Japan. The symbolic act of Tang Yuanbao tearing his own face off to win the competition is a biting satire on China's cruel and hypocritical culture, on its empty propaganda and on the vain pursuit of national glory. Face is what Chinese people think of as the most precious thing in life; having Tang Yuanbao tear off his own bloody face, demonstrates the inhuman aspect of Chinese culture that encourages this behaviour. Wang Shuo does not make Tang Yuanbao into a dead hero but keeps him alive as a living tragedy; he has lost the ability to ride his pedicab to make a living, he has lost his martial arts skill and behaves like a girl; he has lost people's respect, but the hardest thing is that he has to bear this shame and stay alive.

Satirizing the Commercialism Craze

Apart from this satire on politics and culture, Wang Shuo also exposes and criticizes people's behaviour in the commercialization process and the way that a money motivated society has become chaotic. The newspapers are filled with reported cases of fraud and the phenomenon of the 'briefcase company' 皮包公司. These are 'companies' that do not have an office, all they consist of is con-merchants who go round with briefcases cheating people, and then running away and starting another scam elsewhere.

The Quanzong organization, in the name of patriotism and nationalism, collects funds from companies and private enterprises, and generates income from their total control of Tang Yuanbao. They hold an auction to sell Tang Yuanbao's watch, rubber-soled shoes, and military underpants; and hold a 'human body exhibition' displaying Tang

Yuanbao with a group of animal freaks as a money-making venture of the lowest possible taste. Their methods are as described in the comment by Zhao Yuhang: 'Vulgar, it is purely utilising people's novelty-seeking psychology.'²³⁵

The Quanzong organization deceives people and at the same time is deceived by others. Tang Yuanbao's advertisement for books is blatantly counterfeited by many other business people to advertise refrigerators, spirits, soap, etc. TV is flooded by images of Tang Yuanbao promoting products for which the Quanzong organization has not received any payment.

Also satirized are the corrupt lifestyles of business leaders. The leader of the Quanzong organization, Zhao Yuhang, uses funds he has collected as investments to fund an extravagant lifestyle, living in luxury hotels. He awakes in a luxury French style bedroom in his hotel one morning to change to a room with a Qing dynasty-style dragon bed. Zhao wants to sleep in a different room every two hours. At the same time, the Quanzong organization has been black-listed by restaurant businesses throughout the whole city for not paying their bills. When they discover the white boxer Tang Yuanbao is going to fight is dead, and Quanzong will lose the chance to make money, they conceal the news in order to keep the money rolling in. The true purpose of the organization is here clearly revealed; fighting with the foreigners to gain national honour is only an excuse: the real aim of the Quanzong group is to make money and enjoy a luxurious life-style.

²³⁵ *ibid.* vol. 3, p.73 (庸俗, 纯粹是利用群众的猎奇心理.)

The novel shows how the excesses of the money craze will lead to their own evils and disasters in the new economic age, just as the politics craze had in the decades of the political age. People should really be aware that 'Everything should accord with economic principles'²³⁶ is not just a slogan but a necessity for managing a stable developing country in which people will benefit from what they contribute.

Satire on Literary Phenomena

Mocking writers and literary circles is what Wang Shuo has consistently done in his other stories, such as *Nothing Serious*. Here Wang Shuo continues his satire on the literary field by talking about the situation of writers and literature in America and capitalist countries.

The Xiao shenshi 小绅士 (Little gentleman) who knows about the literary systems of Western countries says:

'When people talk about literature, they express the opinion that American writers are also very confused: many people are turning to popular literature now, and some serious writers have already not written anything for many years. They very much admire us, and think that China is amazing to be so poor and yet feed so many writers, this is unimaginable in America. They pay close attention to Chinese literature, and think that hope for literature lies in China.'²³⁷

This is an ironic comment on the system of state support for Chinese literature and writers. Although China was much poorer than America in the 1980s, the Chinese government had provided state salaries to writers under the socialist system since

²³⁶ *ibid.*, vol. 3, p.159 (一切按经济规律办事)

²³⁷ *ibid.* vol. 3, p.84 (谈到文学, 他们表示, 美国的作家也有很多困惑, 很多人正在转向通俗文学, 一些严肃的作家已经很多年没有写东西了. 他们很羡慕我们, 认为中国了不起, 这么穷还养着这么多作家, 这在美国是不可想像的. 他们很关注中国文学, 认为文学的希望在中国.)

1949. In return they expected to treat literature as a part of the mass media, manipulating public opinion, purveying party propaganda and providing mass education. Chinese salaried writers have to take heed of what the authorities demand: they cannot avoid becoming propaganda tools. It is not realistic to expect them to take a pure entertainment and pure art line, or to be rebellious, or criticise and complain about the political environment.

Wang Shuo satirizes the attitudes of writers on the thorny issue of popular (tongsu) literature versus serious (yansu) literature. Many Chinese writers have been unable to accept the traumatic changes that have led to serious literature losing the majority of its readers to popular literature. Popular literature is more lively and geared to an enthusiastic readership in the commercial market. 'Serious literature' is losing its relevance and the system of a government organized Chinese Writers' Association is facing reform. Wang Shuo avoids criticizing this directly but says ironically: American writers think the hope for literature lies in China.

Wang Shuo does not simply praise the American cultural system but satirizes both Chinese and American cultural ideology. He also points out that American literary and art works are not all anti-tradition and anti-mainstream culture. The Xiao shenshi talked about what he thinks should learn from America:

'I am afraid that what is more difficult and tests a writer's talent and creative ability more is how to sing the praises of the authorities and tradition without making people feel disgusted by this.'²³⁸

People all know that Chinese literature, film and art all have a very obvious propaganda purpose. Yet, Western cultural production, including American literature,

²³⁸ In Wang Shuo's words: 恐怕更难的更考验一个作家的才华和创新能力的倒是如何不令人反感地为当局为传统唱赞歌。 *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.3, pp.86-87

film and art, all have their own ideological orientation too; they too, Hollywood films for example, are propaganda for the social values of their societies, and are not necessarily anti-authority or anti-tradition. American cultural products also have a strong didactic function. Wang Shuo here points out that the difference is the American way is more subtle and allows people to feel comfortable and easily accept the views being promoted whilst at the same time satisfying the government. In this comparison with the West, particularly America, Wang Shuo shows his own attitude towards mass culture. Mass culture products should above all be welcomed by people.

Satire on Traditional Chinese Culture

The Quanzong organization arranges a dinner for Tang Yuanbao to 'combine education with eating' 寓教于吃; it is composed of 'cultural dishes' 文化菜. Every dish is named after a famous traditional maxim including: '三人行, 必有我师' (where three people go, one of them must be my teacher); '万般皆下品, 唯有读书高.' (the 10,000 ways are all inferior, only studying is honourable) and '国中不可一日无君.' (the country cannot be without a ruler for a single day) '在家从父, 出嫁从夫, 夫死从子' (at home obey ones father, in marriage obey one's husband, after the death of one's husband, obey one's son).²³⁹ Every literate person has been influenced by these injunctions, which are often cited in print and in daily speech, and every traditional injunction has had a fundamental role in China's thousands of years of traditional education. The dross and the essence are mixed together; some of these still influence people today and restrict their thought and behaviour. The maxim 'the 10,000 ways are all inferior, only studying is honourable' still reflects many intellectuals' attitude

²³⁹ *ibid.*, vol.3, pp.49-50

of valuing themselves as occupying the highest status among all people in society; people with practical skills are undervalued by intellectuals, and the young generation is encouraged to study mechanically rather than learning from practice. The traditional maxim ‘书中自有黄金屋，书中自有颜如玉’ (in books there are gold houses and faces like jade), tells people if you study you can have official position, become very rich, have a room full of gold, and marry a beautiful girl. Wang Shuo satirizes the traditional high value put on studying.

As an example of Wang Shuo mocking Chinese people's worship of books in the novel, Tang Yuanbao is required to make a book advertisement, with him suggesting the book is symbolized by a torch leading humanity forward into the future.²⁴⁰ This exaggeration of the usefulness of books satirizes the god-like status of books in China. Tang Yuanbao is encouraged to wave his book and imagine himself like a god looking out over the masses and delivering a message to the people. Wang Shuo is here also hinting at the god-like role intellectuals assume for themselves.

Apart from the traditional semi-official Buddhist religion, Chinese folk culture also supports strong superstitious beliefs. Tang Yuanbao has an arrangement made for him to go and see wizard Zhang Daxian (张大仙) to drive away evil spirits from his body. What wizard Zhang does is to torture Tang Yuanbao until he passes out.²⁴¹ Although various superstitions have been forbidden in socialist China for decades, there is still a strong superstitious belief in society. This was manifested during the ‘Mao craze’ at the beginning of 1990s, when Beijing drivers, including taxi drivers, hung a photo of Mao on their front mirror as a mascot to avoid bad luck. Nobody wanted to admit that

²⁴⁰ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 3, pp.92-93

²⁴¹ *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp.58-64

this was superstitious behaviour but everyone worried about bad luck on the roads. In the late 1990s, various kinds of mascots started being sold in stores and along the street; these were especially for people in their 'benmingnian' 本命年,²⁴² who started wearing red mascots, such as red belts, to avoid bad luck in that year. Society in China has become more developed, modernised and westernised than ever before, yet the superstitious atmosphere in the 1990s and the present day is much stronger than in the 1980s.

The Writing of the Novel

Wang Shuo satirizes a great many things in *Please Don't Call Me Human*, including politics, history, culture, commercialization, etc., which intersect with each other. The novel is full of dialogue, much of which has deep meaning, pointing out serious political or social problems, though it masquerades as banter. An example is when Bai Du persuades Tang Yuanbao to go to the Liberated Area. In this section the novel becomes quite intense in its ideas. Wang Shuo realized the problem himself and discussed this, saying:

'It loses a sense of pace. It is also too dense. At the beginning people will still laugh, but by the end they can't be bothered. Because every sentence demands applause, none gets it.'²⁴³

There are many aspects where the satire simply touches on the topic without developing it in full. For example, Wang Shuo satirizes the way people learn superficial things about Western culture. Tang Yuanbao learns from his mentors that he must go back to bed to drink coffee in the morning; and he has to learn Western

²⁴² Benmingnian 本命年, every 12th year after the year of one's birth.

²⁴³ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.34 (失去节奏感了.密度太大.开始还能笑,最后笑不动了.每句都是彩儿,就全不是彩儿了.)

modern dance—ballet, etc. Yet, Wang Shuo's scepticism towards total westernization (quanpan xihua 全盘西化) is not fully expressed, and because of this, the satirical effect of the novel is not as successful as expected.

Wang Shuo produced this outrageous story intending people to see more clearly social and political phenomena in China. The story is full of deliberate innuendo, demonstrating Wang Shuo's serious intention in writing the work. Although he himself is critical of his work, and sometimes *Please Don't Call Me Human* can become a little tedious for the reader, nevertheless it is very effective in using humour to tackle a serious theme.

d. Growing up Stories: *Wild Animals, I Am Your Dad & It Looks Beautiful*

The Story of a Generation

Different generations had very different experiences during the Cultural Revolution and this is reflected in literary works. Yang Jiang's 杨绛 *Ganxiao liu ji* 干校六记 (Six Records of a Cadre School) reflects adult, especially rightist intellectuals' lives in labour camps. Ah Cheng's 阿城 three 'Kings' stories²⁴⁴ reflect the life of 'educated youth' 知识青年. Since Wang Shuo's generation (he was born in 1958) was too young to be 'educated youth' or 'red guards' 红卫兵, their experiences in the politically chaotic years were not treated as being as important or valuable as those of the older generations. However, in the 1990s, more and more people realized that people who were young during those years could offer a new contribution towards understanding the nation's social and political life.

Wang Shuo's story *Dongwu xiongmeng* 动物凶猛 (Wild Animals) is based on his own experiences. It is not about exposing the tragedy or inhumanity or miserable lives during tempestuous political movements, but about teenage boys growing up in a very leisurely and carefree environment. The protagonist is a male middle school student who lives in a military courtyard. He often plays truant from school; he goes round with a gang, whose activities include violent fights with other teenage gangs, chasing after girls, including his unsuccessful first love, and using a home-made master key to get into people's homes. He is one of those 'bad' boys who rebels against everything expected of a teenage boy by his parents and school.

²⁴⁴ Ah Cheng 阿城, *Qi wang* 棋王 (King of Chess), *Shu wang* 树王 (King of Trees), *Haizi wang* 孩子王 (King of Children).

The boy dreams of becoming a military officer; he wishes to get involved in a world war, and, through war with Soviet Union and America, to become an internationally famous war hero. He thinks: 'I have an unshakable responsibility to liberate the people of the world'.²⁴⁵ This is all a typical result of the influence on impressionable boys of political propaganda within a militarised society.

This military-style existence was very common for Wang Shuo's generation. There are many figures in the cultural world, such as writers and film directors, who shared these experiences. Film directors Feng Xiaogang and Jiang Wen²⁴⁶ grew up in military courtyards. The woman writer Wang Anyi has talked about her military-style life when she was young.²⁴⁷ Apart from these people born into a military background, many people joined the army in their youth. For example, the writers Liu Heng 刘恒 and Liu Zhenyuan 刘震云 joined the army when they were fifteen years old, Mo Yan 莫言 joined when he was twenty-one years old.²⁴⁸ The military culture influenced a whole generation; almost every boy and girl wore military-style clothing from primary school onwards, watched war films, sang military songs, and studied Mao's quotations. Becoming a military hero or heroine was a dream they all subscribed to.

²⁴⁵ Wang Shuo, *Wild Animal, The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 4, p.251

²⁴⁶ Jiang Wen 姜文 has acted in many films, such as *Furong zhen* 芙蓉镇 (A Small Town Called Hibiscus), *Honggaoliang* 红高粱 (Red Sorghum), the TV serial *Beijingren zai Niuyue* 北京人在纽约 (Beijingese in New York), *Da taijian Li Lianying* 大太监李莲英 (The Eunuch Li Lianying), and several times won the best actor award in China.

²⁴⁷ Wang Anyi 王安忆, *Jishi yu xugou—chuangzao shijie fangfa zhi yi zhong* 纪实与虚构—创造世界方法之一 (Fact and Fiction—A Way of Creating the World), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993, p.463

²⁴⁸ Liu Heng 刘恒, *Bai wo* 白渦 (White Whirlpool), Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1992. Liu Zhenyun 刘震云, *Guan ren* 官人 (Official), Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1992. Mo Yan 莫言, *Jinfa yinger* 金发婴儿 (Golden Haired Baby), Wuhan, Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1993

However, Wang Shuo's way of portraying characters has been described as an 'anti-heroic' approach.²⁴⁹ The boy (the protagonist) joins in gang fights when there is no chance to realize his heroic dream in real life. When detained by the police, he is frightened and bursts into tears, then he is allowed to go. The father of the protagonist is often absent, and does not exercise authority over the child, leaving space for the boy to do what he likes. Part of his own image of the hero is showing his power over others; the boy takes violent revenge on the girl Milan when she does not respond to his advances.

Being a member of the gang makes the boy feel powerful, safe and warm; that is his closest community outside the family. He wants to win the approval of other members of this pseudo-family. In one gang fight, he violently smashes a brick on the head of a member of a rival gang and enjoys the praise of his own gang, satisfying his vanity and dreams of being a hero.

'My heroism and courage were seen by everybody; they came to pat my shoulder and praised me: 'Other people left but you were still fighting, you are really wicked.' I proudly threw out my chest and smiled, as I was boasting I stole a glance at Yu Beipei, who looked at me smiling.'²⁵⁰

People felt proud of their violence in those violent years. Other young 'rebels' 造反派 had much the same kind of behaviour. Film director Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 remorsefully described how he struck father in the face during a public criticism meeting to make clear his rejection of his father's standpoint.²⁵¹ Rebellious behaviour towards one's parents was encouraged during that time. Zhang Tiesheng 张铁生 became a well-

²⁴⁹ Li Donghui, *The 'Phenomenon' of Wang Shuo: A Historico-Literary Consideration*, PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, pp.98-108

²⁵⁰ Wang Shuo, *Wild Animals: The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 4, p.278

²⁵¹ Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, *Shaonian Kaige 少年凯歌* (Young Kaige), Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1993

known hero for handing in a blank examination script.²⁵² He acted as a model for other students opposing their school authorities and 'elitist' policies on selection and examinations. The film director Ying Da recalled that he followed the 'tide of the time' by signing his name and handing in a blank examination script. He was in middle school at the time and free of his 'literature and art black line people' 文艺黑线人物 parents who were sent to a labour camp.²⁵³

Wang Shuo acted as a spokesperson for his generation. Many people found themselves featured in Wang Shuo's stories, which were particularly welcomed by his generation. The actor turned film director Jiang Wen 姜文 said he had things in common with Wang Shuo, and always felt a vicarious thrill when he read Wang Shuo's stories.²⁵⁴ Jiang Wen was so taken with *Wild Animals* that he decided to adopt it as the basis of his first film, *In the Heat of the Sun*, to portray his own growing-up experiences.²⁵⁵ He interpreted the story into a film version which visually represents the characters and the political age very clearly.

²⁵² Zhang Tiesheng 张铁生 took part in the university entry examination when had just resumed in June 1973; instead of finishing the exam, he wrote a letter on the exam paper to complain. This was published on 10 August 1973 in *People's Daily* 人民日报, and caused a movement to struggle against the 'bourgeoisie education line', as a result of which the examination system was abolished again. Zhang Tiesheng became the blank exam paper hero 白卷英雄, praised by the authorities during the Cultural Revolution as a 'rebellious' model for young people.

²⁵³ Xu Linzheng 徐林正, 'Ying Da gushi: xiao ao si shui nian hua' 英达故事: 笑傲似水年华 (Ying Da's Story: Smile Looking at Youth Slip Away Like Flowing Water), quoted from *Dazhong dianying* 大众电影 (Popular Film) http://www.dzdy.com/zz/2002/2002_22_002.htm

²⁵⁴ Jiang Wen 姜文, 'The World Through the Eyes of Jiang Wen', *Chinese Literature* 中国文学, Autumn 1993, pp.164-172

²⁵⁵ See Chapter III on Film.

Wang Shuo feels a great sense of personal satisfaction from the story. He said: 'Among my works *Wild Animals* is the one which made me feel most excited.'²⁵⁶ He believes:

'Wild Animals recounts things I miss which have disappeared completely; it has a very strong sense of nostalgia for me.'²⁵⁷

The story describes people's simple and frugal life at that time, such as the old furniture in the houses, soldier's uniforms and imitation versions of them for teenagers, and the language of Soviet Russian films. He often talks about his special feelings for his old mates of that time,²⁵⁸ and he thinks the word 'friend' means to him his mates when he was young. He cannot feel the same sense of closeness with the friends he made later.²⁵⁹

Wang Shuo invested that period of life with much more emotion than usual. One critic commented:

'Wang is known for his scathing sense of sarcasm, but when it comes to these youngsters, his pen is not as sharp. In fact, one can even sense a rather strong touch of nostalgia in his depictions of these uniformed youth. Such nostalgia is the very moment of his self-identification with youngsters who, even during the Cultural Revolution, continued to enjoy a sense of privilege and superiority.'²⁶⁰

The story has a frank and gentle style. There is no particular political theme in the story. Wang Shuo does not try to deliver a profound message through the story, and he employs an honest, plain narrative language rather than his satirical style.

²⁵⁶ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.30 (我的作品中令我自己最激动的是<动物凶猛>.)

²⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p.34 (<动物凶猛>就流露出我对那种已经彻底消失的东西的一种缅怀,有非常强烈的怀旧情绪.)

²⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.7

²⁵⁹ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, pp.184-185

²⁶⁰ Xueping Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p.115

Wang Shuo talked about the positive influence of the Cultural Revolution on teenagers like him, saying:

‘No matter how bad the Cultural Revolution it was, it broke the order of life, and provided the opportunity to develop ones own characteristics. It got children away from the restrictions of decrepit school education. The ‘learning period’ of life was spent in society; what happened in school was meaningless compared with these things.’²⁶¹

Wang Shuo consistently reviewed his life experiences when he was young; this influenced his and his generation’s outlook. This is especially true of the youthful ‘hooligan’ characters’ and their rebellious behaviour in many of his stories. Wang Shuo later very much regretted writing this as a separate story. It spoilt his big plan for his novel ‘Cruel Youth’ 残酷青春, an autobiographical work including the same period of his life.²⁶² *Wild Animals* is a major piece in the jigsaw of Wang Shuo’s image creation.

²⁶¹ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.7

²⁶² Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.55

The Theme of Fathers and Sons

I Am Your Dad was originally planned by the film director Feng Xiaogang for a TV serial, but for some reason he did not go forward with this. Wang Shuo thought it was a good story and wrote it down.²⁶³ The story was published in 1991, and won an award from a Shanghai literary magazine. This is the only recorded literary award Wang Shuo has ever won. It was not a major literary award, although Wang Shuo was pleased to win the 5,000 yuan prize (around £400).²⁶⁴ Later on Wang Shuo as film director adapted the story into his first film *Baba* (Dad) in 1996.²⁶⁵ The story is about Ma Linsheng, an autocratic divorcee bringing up his only son, teenager Ma Rui.

A number of other writers had written stories recalling their fathers and reflecting on the family environment they grew up in. Wang Meng's 王蒙 novel *Huodong bian ren xing* 活动变人形 (Moveable Parts),²⁶⁶ describes his irresponsible father complaining about his unhappy marriage, and leaving his wife and children in a state of agonised insecurity. Wang Meng's painful memories of his father, led to a more general cultural introspection. The short story 'Fuqin' 父亲 (Father)²⁶⁷ by Liang Xiaosheng 梁晓声 is also a recollection of his father, a hard working builder and the only pair of hands to feed a family of seven members. Liang criticized his father for his ignorance: Liang's elder sister died when she was three years old and his elder brother went mad.

²⁶³ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, pp.53-54

²⁶⁴ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.42

²⁶⁵ See Chapter III on Film

²⁶⁶ Wang Meng 王蒙, *Huodong bian renxing* 活动变人形 (Moveable Parts), *Wang Meng wenji* 王蒙文集 (Collected Works of Wang Meng), vol.2, pp.1-342, Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1993

²⁶⁷ Liang Xiaosheng 梁晓声, *Fuqin* 父亲 (Father), Beijing: Jingji Ribao chubanshe, Shanxi luyou chubanshe, 1997

A complicated mixture of love and hate towards the father is reflected in these literary works.

It is no surprise that Wang Shuo has strong feelings about his father's violence towards him. Wang Shuo's father had a firm belief in the old Chinese maxi: 'a filial son develops from the cane' 棍棒底下出孝子. His father's violence did not make Wang Shuo obey orders; on the contrary, he felt humiliated and hated his father. Wang Shuo's rebellion began at home.²⁶⁸

Wang Shuo talked about how he understood the relationship between father and son. He said:

'The two who are originally the closest people in the world become the biggest enemies of each other. The hurt they bring to each other far exceeds the trouble other people could cause.'²⁶⁹

Wang Shuo decided to 'play profound' 玩深沉 when he wrote the thoughtful *I Am Your Dad*, a work praised by many middle-aged intellectuals. Wang Shuo said this story was the only one among his stories where he started writing from a concept.²⁷⁰

Wang Shuo explores the family / state identification in dealing with the issue of the relationship between father and son in traditional Chinese society. A family is the epitome of a country. Just as Wang Meng suggests the theme of national reform when

²⁶⁸ Zuo Shula 左舒拉, 'Wang Shuo—yige miaoshi changgui de suren' 王朔——一个藐视常规的'俗人' (Wang Shuo—A 'Vulgar Person' Who Belittle the Ordinary Rules), *Dazhong dianying* 大众电影 (Popular Film), 1989, vol. 6, p.14

²⁶⁹ Wang Shuo, 'Fuqin—youshi xuyao.xiaoxin-duobi-de dongxi' 父亲——有时需要小心躲避的东西 (Father—There Is Something One Should Sometimes Take Care to Avoid), *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.138

²⁷⁰ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.59 ('I did not start from a concept to write, except for the one story 'I am Your Dad'. (我写东西没有从一个概念出发过. 只有一篇<我是你爸爸>除外.)

he describes reform of the family meal system in his story *Hard Porridge*, Wang Shuo chooses to portray the patriarchal old-fashioned father and the rebellious modern son as a trope for the ruler / ruled relationships in patriarchal political society. The critic Ji Hongzhen 季红真 thinks:

‘Wang Shuo feels great nostalgia for his childhood: the ideals inculcated during his childhood make him perplexed over the present state of the nation.’²⁷¹

The old saying is: ‘the emperor and officials are just like father and son’ 君臣如父子. This implies the emperor has absolute rights over officials, just as the father has absolute rights over his sons. The son must obey the father totally, a fact which is reflected in the thousands of years of ‘filial culture’ 孝文化 in China. This is part of the social control system developed by Confucius and his heirs to ensure social stability. It became a prime target of the 4th May revolution. Reform of the country had to include reform of the family. Lu Xun wrote an article in 1919 criticizing the traditional concept of father and son, and pointing out that because people pay great attention to the power of the father in China, ‘the revolution should extend to your old man’ 革命要革到老子身上.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Ji Hongzhen 季红真, ‘Wang Shuo: chaoyue zibei’ 王朔: 超越自悲 (Wang Shuo: Overcoming an Inferiority Complex), *Zhongshen de xiaoxiang* 众神的肖像 (The Portrayal of Gods), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1996. p.159

²⁷² Lu Xun 鲁迅, ‘Women xianzai zenyang zuo fuqin’ 我们现在怎样做父亲 (How Are We To Be Fathers Now?), *Lu Xun quanji* 鲁迅全集 (Lu Xun’s Collected Works), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1981, vol.1, pp.129-143

Political Commentary

The failure of the 1989 student movement marked the failure of an attempt at democratic reform. "I am your Dad" was written in 1991, when the political atmosphere was still tense. Ping Chou commented on the story:

'This is another example of Wang Shuo's masterful employment of ambiguities and fuzzy themes as well as an indication of his political instinct for self-protection.'²⁷³

After a number of conflicts between the father and the son, including arguments and violent beatings, the intention to bring democratic reform to the relationship fails. Ma Linsheng's comments automatically draw comparison with the imperial court. After Ma Linsheng hits his son Ma Rui and explains the meaning of authority, he watches the changes in his son who 'bows and scrapes like a slave'; the narrator conveys Ma Linsheng thoughts:

'He had not yet the arrogant desire to establish a mini imperial court of one master one servant, acting like an absolute monarch, and behaving like an overlord everywhere. But how had his son voluntarily become a little eunuch? Ma Linsheng was from a poor family, he had never lorded it over others.....'²⁷⁴

Ma Linsheng wants to learn from the West, and adopts an ostensibly democratic family system, including having his son address him by his name, rather than calling him father. He described his thoughts about family reform to Ma Rui, saying:

'Of course, this is just my one tentative idea now; if we are really to put it into practice, it needs an effort from both of us. This is a new thing, an attempt, it can be said to be unprecedented in history—our family's. Neither of us has experience of this, we can only grope our way forward.

²⁷³ Ping Chou, *Halfway Rebel: Rise and Fall of Wang Shuo's 'Hooligan Literature' Between 1978 and 1999*, PhD. Dissertation, Stanford University, p.137

²⁷⁴ Wang Shuo, *I Am Your Dad, The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 4, pp.53-54

If you have some good suggestions and ideas, you can raise them for discussion.²⁷⁵

The father really treats his son like an official. These words are like the words used in the process of reform in China. Geremie Barmé points out:

‘Apart from being an entertaining and deeply perceptive study of the psychology of power and family relationships, it can also be ‘read’ as a masterful study of the social and even political dilemmas of urban China, with no lack of political asides and jokes thrown in for good measure.’²⁷⁶

It is interesting to compare what the authoritarian father does to exercise power over his son and how the son reacts to him. The contrast hints at the big difference between the behaviour of the authorities in power and that of the people under their control.

After the family’s democratic reforms have failed, the father keeps even closer watch on the son’s behaviour. Ma Linsheng feels he does not understand his son, so he decides to find out about him by following him. He conceals himself outside a window to listen to what Ma Rui and his friends say, and looks through Ma Rui’s school bag. While Ma Linsheng is searching the pockets of his son’s clothes, Ma Rui comes back home, finds him doing this and eyes him resentfully. Although Ma Linsheng feels embarrassed, he still wants to demonstrate his power over his son. He orders Ma Rui to give him the key of a locked draw. The son refuses. Ma Linsheng uses tools to force open the draw in front of the son, tears up Ma Rui’s friends’ photos and letters, and checks up on the books the son is reading. These are the means the father uses to demonstrate his uncompromising power over his son. The father’s tyrannical behaviour raises uncomfortable parallels with the political situation in China.

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp.73-74

²⁷⁶ Geremie Barmé, ‘Wang Shuo and Liumang (‘Hooligan’) Culture’, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, vol. 0, Issue 28 (Jul., 1992) p.63

The son, Ma Rui, treats his father in a completely different way. Ma Rui is very modern, and has many modern ideas. For example, he is very concerned about his divorced father's happiness in his personal life. He introduces his father to the divorced mother of one of his classmates, and encourages his father to re-marry, displaying a generosity of spirit that the father does not appear to deserve. No matter what his father does to him, the son ultimately chooses to stay by his father when he could go to live with his mother.

Ping Chou criticizes the constant compromises:

‘Wang Shuo’s reaction to the family paradigm in *I’m Your Old Man* is ambivalent: in an equally unsuccessful democratic experiment Wang Shuo seems content to mediate between father and son for a balanced relationship rather than attempt to diagnose the source of problem.’²⁷⁷

Not only does the son lose out every time he rebels against his father’s authority, he suffers in encounters with others. When he reveals the truth to a hypocritical teacher his trust is betrayed, and when he decides to stand up to hooligans on the street, he ends up in hospital after a vicious beating. He is beaten by his father, publicly criticized in school, then beaten up by hooligans. This is what happens to a gentle boy like Ma Rui who has declared: ‘I just know how to respect the truth’.²⁷⁸

The slogans ‘respect the truth’ and ‘everybody is equal before the truth’ are just political propaganda. In practice, whenever conflict arises, the power of authority overcomes the power of truth. It is the father Ma Linsheng who writes the detailed self-criticism for him to present to the school and the teacher as they demand. Before

²⁷⁷ Ping Chou, *Halfway Rebel: Rise and Fall of Wang Shuo's 'Hooligan Literature' Between 1978 and 1999*, PhD. Dissertation, Stanford University, p.141

²⁷⁸ Wang Shuo, *I Am Your Dad, The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 4, p.39

the school authorities, even the father is powerless. The father teaches Ma Rui to obey authority no matter whether it is right or wrong. Geremie Barmé comments on the story, saying:

‘It is a story that is bitingly cruel and lovingly indulgent in turns; one moment it reveals as extreme an anti-authoritarianism and cynicism as extreme as Wang’s earlier work, yet in the next this gives way to a sense of sardonic understanding, compromise and helplessness.’²⁷⁹

There are so many tragic examples in real life of people who try to oppose authority. Ordinary individuals have to obey it, at least superficially. The story satirizes the authorities, and also reflects the complex mentality of people.

²⁷⁹ Geremie Barmé, ‘Wang Shuo and Liumang (‘Hooligan’) Culture’, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, vol. 0, Issue 28 (Jul., 1992) p.63

Childhood Nostalgia

When Wang Shuo ceased to write fiction but concentrated totally on making films and TV serials after 1992, Geremie Barmé was very disappointed by the shift. He said:

‘It’s very sad that Wang Shuo’s drive for money and fame—his therapy issue, as it were—his hindered his development as an artist. He is an extremely fine craftsman of the novel, and one of the best writers of the Chinese language.’²⁸⁰

Wang Shuo explained the situation in 1999; he gave up writing because he had written a million words in fiction, film and TV serials scripts in 1991. He suffered a ‘writing crisis’, which was also a spiritual crisis for him,²⁸¹ so he turned his career in the direction of film and TV serials making.

Wang Shuo’s latest and only post-1992 story was *Kan shang qu hen mei* 看上去很美 (It Looks Beautiful) published in 1999. Wang Shuo was no longer so concerned with money; his attitude in writing had changed considerably. In talking about his purpose in writing, he said:

‘Not for money, not for beliefs, not for readers, not for the needs of society. If I write again, I will just write for the only reader I am concerned with - myself.’²⁸²

Wang Shuo has the ambition of writing a chronicle of his generation. However, he is facing the danger of repeating himself. Because Wang Shuo had plenty of material at his disposal, he was able to publish continually between 1986-1992. He complained that when he wanted to put the record straight about himself, there would not be much

²⁸⁰ Jamie James, ‘Bad Boy’, *The New Yorker*, April 21, 1997, p.52

²⁸¹ Wang Shuo, *It Looks Beautiful*, Introduction, p.1

²⁸² Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.104 (我不想再写那些与我无关的东西了, 不想再为钱, 信仰, 读者, 社会需求写东西了. 如再写我将只为我心目中的惟一读者——我自己写作.)

unused material left.²⁸³ Lack of material may be one reason why Wang Shuo chose to write about the protagonist's life (the boy protagonist represents Wang Shuo himself) between the ages of three and eight throughout the whole of *It Looks Beautiful*. This made people believe, erroneously, that it belongs to the category of children's literature. *It looks beautiful* reflects Wang Shuo's longstanding plan of writing a major novel, under the title 'Cruel Youth' (残酷青春), about the experiences of himself and his generation. Although the title is different, *It looks beautiful* is apparently still part of this plan.

It looks beautiful is written from an adult perspective but through the eyes of a small child, Fang Qiangqiang 方枪枪. It employs the first person and third person narrator in describing memories of childhood experiences. Like *I Am Your Dad* and *Wild Animals*, it is a story about the experience of growing up. The story is not autobiographical, but fabricated, although it is based on real locations and people. This gives it a sense of immediacy and reality; this is visible in the way the girl character Chen Nanyan 陈南燕 is portrayed as always present around the protagonist Fang Qiangqiang when he is in kindergarten. They have dialogues about typical fantasies from children's imagination: living in a palace, being a prince and princess. They also ask typical children's questions of their parents, such as where they came from, and they play typical boys' war games. The story recalls wonderful memories of things now lost, the tall, magnificent old-fashioned kindergarten building and its beautiful environment; the food they ate: steamed sweet buns (糖包) and steamed jam

²⁸³ Zhang Cuo 张错, 'Fangtan: Wang Shuo jixu kan wenxue' 访谈: 王朔继续侃文学 (Interview: Wang Shuo Continues to Chat about Literature), quoted from 新语丝电子文库 <http://xys.org/xys/ebooks/literature/novels/Wang-Shuo/interview2.txt>

buns (果酱包); the games children played: hopscotch (跳房子), shuttlecock kicking (踢毽), skipping (跳绳). All this creates a very strong atmosphere of nostalgia.

The story is a strong reaffirmation of traditional values. When Wang Shuo looks back to the good old days, there is implicitly an unfavourable comparison with the present young generation growing up with video game players, television programmes, eating McDonald's food. We can see this as his conservatism, patriotism even, in the face of massive change, much of it inspired by alien civilizations. But at the same time this is shrewd marketing, aimed at a generation of readers that is having difficulty coming to terms with the changes, articulating their feelings of alienation from the present and nostalgia for a past age when pleasures were simpler, and more 'Chinese'. At the same time it is aimed at young readers; the emphasis is on making the life of Fang Qiangqiang appear full of fun, rather than setting out to educate young people. Wang employs a plain and simple language to attract younger readers.

Wang Shuo said: 'The thing I most want is to give myself a change.'²⁸⁴ In the story, we look in vain for the witty colloquial language style, the biting irony and buccaneering spirit of Wang Shuo's earlier stories. Here, the theme of the story is obscure, causing people to condemn Wang Shuo for being 'written out'. Lu Wenbin's view is that Wang Shuo is following the wave of 'post-new historicism' in recalling his past life.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.167 (我最想的是给自己一个变化.)

²⁸⁵ Lu Wenbin 路文彬, 'Hou xin lishi zhuyi yu huaijiu' 后新历史主义与怀旧 (Post New Historicism and Nostalgia), *Fujian Tribune* 福建论坛 (Fuji Forum), 2000, vol. 1, pp.73-77

Wang Shuo is already a middle aged man (he was 40 in 1998) growing further and further away from his bohemian youth. His speciality of portraying rebellious young people and their life-styles has lost relevance in the current fast developing Chinese scene. Instead of exploring the new life-styles of contemporary society, he is more at home reviewing his old life-style from his childhood. In this nostalgic atmosphere, the story proceeds in a gentle manner, and the narrator speaks with an indulgent smile on his face.

Wang Shuo develops his master plan in the story, linking this new story with his old stories. He re-introduces the old characters who appeared in his stories of a decade ago, including Gao Yang, Gao Jin, Li Bailing and Wang Ruohai, the old mates of Fang Yan (representing Wang Shuo himself). And these characters participate in Fang Yan's childhood (Qiangqiang is his 'baby' name). Wang Shuo says this story is just 'a beginning'²⁸⁶ -- the start of a series of stories. Wang Shuo is trying to complete his re-creation of the life of this group of people, in order to explore the meaning of their lives as they react to political and economic changes in a fast evolving society. In the story, these life styles and the environment in which they existed have gone, but they live on in the minds of the participants influencing their later lives. Wang Shuo is attempting to explore the roots of their 'hooliganism' to make sense of their rebellious spirits.²⁸⁷

Wang Shuo's intention here reminds one of his comment in *The Operators*, that life is like playing football; you may not score in the whole match but you still have to play

²⁸⁶ Wang Shuo, *It Looks Beautiful*, Introduction, p.5

²⁸⁷ Zhu Xiaowen 朱晓雯 & Tao Xin 陶欣, 'Fanpan de yidai' 反判的一代 (A Rebellious Generation), *Zhongguo bijiao wenxue* 中国比较文学 (Chinese Comparative Literature), 2001, vol.2, p62-66

very hard because the spectators are cheering and giving support. 'Life is just like running backwards and forwards, listening to other people cheering.'²⁸⁸ Is Wang Shuo writing the story of his life to hear the cheering of his audience?

And some critics think that Wang Shuo's target is to get his works accepted as 'classics' 经典.²⁸⁹ He has changed his original image of a 'marginal person' in an effort to occupy a central place in the commercialised literary world, and in society. He is no longer the spokesman of the beat generation; he acts as a cultural hero avoiding any clashes with authority. The rebellious image has gone from *It Looks Beautiful*; all he is trying to do is to review what material he has left in his mind to fill out the incomplete pictures of himself and his group of people for posterity. This is his bid for a place in the literary history. He is not yet praised by officialdom, but is more and more a topic of interest to young intellectuals. They have published reviews on him, and his contribution to the process of commercialization has made him more and more popular with intellectuals in general and literary critics in particular.

It is regrettable that the carnival atmosphere of Wang Shuo's works is no longer there; they have lost their spark and vitality. His role has fallen to a group of new writers,²⁹⁰ such as Wei Hui 卫慧 and Mian Mian 棉棉 whose stories explore new lifestyles and attitudes of the new young generation--'the very latest human beings' 新人类.

²⁸⁸ Wang Shuo, *The Operators, The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.2, p.112 (人生就是跑来跑去, 听别人叫好.)

²⁸⁹ Liang Hong 梁鸿, 'Wang Shuo: cong 'heima' dao 'baima' de shanbian' 王朔: 从 '黑马' 到 '白马' 的嬗变 (Wang Shuo: The Evolution from 'Black Horse' to 'White Horse'), *Beijing shehui kexue* 北京社会科学 (Beijing Social Science), 2002, vol. 4, pp.61-65

²⁹⁰ Fan Xing 樊星, 'Lun bashi niandai yilai wenxue shisuhua sichao de yanbian' 论八十年代以来文学世俗化思潮的演变 (The Evolution of Concepts of Literary Vernacularisation Since the 1980s), *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 (Literature Review), 2001, vol. 2, pp.24-32

III. Wang Shuo's Writing Style

Satirising Official Language

The language Wang Shuo uses in his stories is a mixture, including different kinds and styles of popular language. Wang Shuo talked about the source of his language.

He said:

‘What I draw most support from is urban popular language. I do not know very much about the old Beijing dialect. The popular language has many sources, from (Mao Zedong's) quotations, from important events, and from new allusions, etc. I have never lived in a dialect district. The language I have had contact with is the type that talks about current politics.’²⁹¹

For example, in the story *Nothing Serious* Ma Qing persuades Yang Zhong to work with him. He says to Yang Zhong:

‘Don't do it on your own, let's do it together, more people will have more power, we dare to get the sun and the moon to change to a new day. When people are of one mind, Mount Tai can be moved, the ant has four liang²⁹² of flesh, every carrot has its hole how can we not.....’²⁹³

你就别一个人混啦，咱们还是一起混吧，人多力量大，敢叫日月换新天。人心齐泰山移蚂蚁还有四两肉一个萝卜一个坑咱们怎么就不能从无.....’

This is full of ironic use of political ideology. The sentence ‘more people will have more power’ 人多力量大 is a propaganda slogan from the war-time, emphasising that unity will bring your troops more power. This was also the principle behind the Chinese government encouraging families to have more children. As a result China became the country with the largest population in the world, and enormous problems to match. After the Cultural Revolution people criticised the past mistakes made by

²⁹¹ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.61

²⁹² Liang 两, Chinese measure of weight, per liang equal 50 gram.

²⁹³ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 2, p.473

government.²⁹⁴ Wang Shuo uses this short phrase to imply a host of meanings, from unity and patriotism to criticism of governmental mismanagement and overcrowded homes.

The phrase 'we dare to get the sun and moon change to a new day' 敢叫日月换新天 is a line of poetry from Mao Zedong.²⁹⁵ This expresses the great confidence of Mao Zedong during his fight with the KMT and the Japanese. It hints at victory, but also at the arrogant control over nature, including human beings, that left his successors with horrendous problems. Mao Zedong's poems have been as well inculcated into the brains of common people as his quotations. Wang Shuo, in making fun of Mao's poems, is pointing a sacrilegious finger at words which, not long before, had iconic status.

The sentence 'if the people are of one mind Mount Tai can be moved' 人心齐泰山移 is another propaganda phrase used to emphasise the enormous power of masses if they make concerted efforts. The phrase echoes the old fable 'the foolish old man moves the mountain' 愚公移山. Mao Zedong used this as the title of an article praising people who have no sense of the possibility of failure in order to encourage people to fight against the KMT and Japanese during the dark days in Yan'an.²⁹⁶ This article of Mao's was widely disseminated. The sentence the 'ant has four liang (weight equal to 200 gram) of flesh' 蚂蚁还有四两肉 exaggerates the weight and the importance of

²⁹⁴ A well known case is scholar Ma Yinchu 马寅初, president of Beijing University; who produced a 'new theory of population' 新人口论 in 1955, and suggested the government should control the fast increasing population in the 1950s. He was criticised and asked to resign from his post and his academic works could not be published.

²⁹⁵ Mao Zedong's poem 'Dao Shaoshan' 到韶山 (Arriving at Shaoshan), *Mao-Zedong-shicixuan* 毛泽东诗词选 (Selected Poetry of Mao Zedong), Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991, pp.96-98

²⁹⁶ Mao Zedong, 'Yugong yi shan' 愚公移山 (The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountain'), *Mao Zedong Xuanji* 毛泽东选集 (Selected Works of Mao Zedong), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1966, pp. 1101-1104

the ant. The sentence ‘every carrot has a hole’ 一个萝卜一个坑 is a folk saying meaning every person has a place at work and in society. These last two lines are in very colloquial language, included here makes the text livelier and more amusing. Its folksiness also makes it anticlimactic, highlighting the absurdity of the previous high-sounding phrases.

These phrases are linked together without punctuation, and the meaning of each phrase does not really have very much connection with the rest. The way Wang Shuo arranged his sentences is creative but not totally new or unique. He admits he imitated Wang Meng’s mode of expression because he found it attractive.²⁹⁷ He feels that where one long sentence contains several short sentences, and these are contradictory it creates a tension and gives the whole sentence more dimension.²⁹⁸ This can express a situation that is hard to explain in a few words, and creates a fluidity of meaning beyond the restrictions of normal linguistic logic. It also reflects informal conversation where people go from one sentence to another without a break, and sometimes produce sentences with multiple interpretations. The way he links these sentences together is Wang Shuo having fun himself and creating entertainment for others; this is Wang Shuo’s ‘tiaokan’ language style. The critic Fan Xing has commented:

‘After experiencing the age when everybody was familiar with the ‘little red book’ (Mao Zedong’s quotations) and ‘revolutionary slogans’ filled the air, the popularity of ‘the Wang Shuo craze’ undoubtedly has positive significance in deconstructing the ‘false reverence’.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ Wang Meng carried out language experiments in his stories in the mid-1980s, particularly in his experimental stories *Für Elise* 致爱丽丝 and *Exhilaration* 来劲. Wang Lin, *Wang Meng and Contemporary Chinese Literature*, Durham: Durham East Asian Papers 17, 2003

²⁹⁸ Wang Shuo, ‘Wo de sixiang huibao’ 我的思想汇报 (A Report on My Thought), *Xin-yu si dianzi wenku* 新语丝电子文库 quoted from <http://xys.org/xys/ebooks/literature/novels/Wang-Shuo/sixiang.txt>

²⁹⁹ Fan Xing 樊星, ‘Dangdai ‘jingwei xiaoshuo’ yu Beijing wenhua jingshen’ 当代 ‘京味小说’ 与北京文化精神 (Contemporary ‘Beijing Style Stories’ and the Spirit of Beijing Culture), *Beijing gongye*

Through playing with language, Wang Shuo reflected young people's mentality of 'playing at life' and looking for enjoyment from life. This was contrary to the old definition of life, which was serious, meaningful and demanded that one should contribute to society. These changes reflect people's suspiciousness of what they have been told in the past.

Wang Shuo's ironic language style has been influenced by other writers and works. Apart from the inspiration he got from the street for his vivid colloquialisms, he learnt from Cao Xueqin's *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. This made him think about how to write the sound of the dialogues and to imbue them with different levels of unexpressed meaning. The ironic styles of Lu Xun's works and Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* both had decisive influences on Wang Shuo. The comic dialogue (xiangsheng 相声) writer Liang Zuo 梁左³⁰⁰ showed Wang Shuo how to make ordinary sentences more interesting and have a humorous slant.³⁰¹

What is unique about Wang Shuo's stories is their satirical use of political language; this is a common feature of many of his stories and their greatest distinguishing feature. For example, Wang Shuo satirizes social and political phenomena in the story *Playing for Thrills*. Fang Yan, a murder suspect, wants other people to help him recall what happened ten years ago, so he can prove his innocence. However, he says to Zhang Li:

daxue xuebao 北京工业大学学报 Journal of Beijing Polytechnic University (Social Sciences Edition), Dec. 2002, vol. 2, No. 4, pp.48-53

³⁰⁰ Liang Zuo 梁左 (1957-2001), well known by his comic dialogue (Xiangsheng) in 1980s, started writing sitcom in 1990s, his representative works include 'Wo ai wo jia' 我爱我家 (I Love My Family) and 'Xianren Ma dajie' 闲人马大姐 (Idler Sister Ma), which had great influence in China. He was same generation writer of Wang Shuo, and he was also Wang Shuo's friend.

³⁰¹ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.55

'I want to write my memoirs; haven't you heard the sighs of regret everyday in the newspapers. The old comrades are dying off one after another, and should be helped quickly to sort out their experiences. Their whole lives are intimately connected with the history of our whole revolutionary struggle. This has a vital role in educating young people and helping them to understand history.'³⁰²

我是要写回忆录, 没听报上见天叹息, 老同志死一个少一个, 要抓紧帮助他们把自己的经历整理出来, 他们的一生是和我们整个革命斗争史密不可分的, 对教育青年人帮助他们认识历史有不可替代的作用。

This is a direct crib from official language. Wang Shuo makes mocking reference to the way the government organizes old revolutionaries to write their memoirs as propaganda to educate the younger generations. The murder suspect Fang Yan avails himself of this language to describe revolutionary heroes as a metaphor for his own experiences smuggling goods and chasing girls in the South ten years before. He is suggesting these can compare in importance with people recording the history of their revolutionary struggle. It is humorous but even more a satirical reference to official ideology.

To 'play' with serious political language is the strategy Wang Shuo adopts in his stories. And this political language is very time specific in its reference. For example, in the story *Playing for Thrills*, when Fang Yan tries to find who was the girl with him at the time of the murder, he pretends to be the younger brother of the girl and persuades the other person tell him things about the girl. He says:

'I don't want to call anyone to account, let's let bygones be bygones. To put it in official parlance all the debts are recorded on the heads of the 'Gang of Four'. '³⁰³

我这不是要找谁算帐, 过去的事就让它过去。说句官话, 帐全记在 '四人帮' 头上

³⁰² Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.2, p.275

³⁰³ *ibid.*, vol.2, p.303

The language has a clear time indication. It is the official language of the years after the fall of the 'Gang of Four' in 1976. Millions of people's lives were destroyed by decades of political movements, but the government line was to forget the past, and put all the blame on the 'Gang of Four'. Fang Yan's search for the missing girl becomes linked to national political events, investing it with mock seriousness.

The irony in these stories reflects the way that Wang Shuo's generation woke up after the Cultural Revolution to feel strongly that they had been deceived. The critic He Zhongming has commented:

'Therefore, Wang Shuo's works described the feeling of alienation from reality that is a characteristic of the whole generation in the years after the end of the Cultural Revolution. They detest and reject ideals and culture, and feel uncertain about the future amidst the diseases of the age.'³⁰⁴

It is the way Wang Shuo irreverently employs this political phraseology in totally inappropriate contexts, which creates the humorous effect. In the story *The Operators*, a young couple ask whether the advertised disco dance and free drinks printed on the invitation to the fake writers' award ceremony are genuine or not. Yu Guan comforts Bao Kang saying: 'where there are a group of people there will be a Left, a Centre and a Right'³⁰⁵ 有人群的地方就有左中右. People are categorized as Leftist, Centrist and Rightist according to their different political beliefs and behaviour. Here Yu Guan is commenting on the fact that people are interested in popular entertainment rather than the writers' award ceremony. The former is regarded by intellectuals as 'vulgar', the

³⁰⁴ He Zhongming 贺仲明, "Wenhua bianyuanren' de yuandui yu ganga" '文化边缘人'的怨怼与尴尬 'The resentment and embarrassment of the 'Culturally Marginal People', *Zhongzhou Journal*, 1998, vol. 6, pp.91-99

³⁰⁵ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 2, p.124 (有人的地方就有左中右.)

latter is 'refined'. Yu Guan uses political labels as lifestyle judgements in a witty and amusing manner.

Compared with other writer's ironic styles, Wang Shuo is particularly outstanding for his ironic use of political language. Wang Meng too is well known for his ironic writing style; however he is mainly ironic about social and political phenomena through the plots of the stories. For example, in Wang Meng's representative political allegory 'Jianying de xizhou' 坚硬的稀粥 (Hard Porridge), in describing family meal reforms to satirize social and political reform in China, he does use political terminology, such as 'delegating power to lower levels' (下放权力); 'leadership rejuvenation' (干部年轻化); and 'democratic election' (民主选举). Wang Meng does not employ the whole official sentences used by the authorities for propaganda; he uses his own words to describe the story and satirise political phenomena in general rather than the official ideology.

By contrast, Wang Shuo often uses whole sentences to reflect a political situation. Thus, in the story *Please Don't Call Me Human*, Tang Yuanbao is organised to take part in a group meeting as political training. Somebody reports that there were Trotskyites and remnants of the 'Gang of Four' there. Zhao Yuhang as a leader of the Quanzong organization criticizes this saying:

'Don't wait until things have already happened and blame the leaders for not telling you. Our wonderful situation of today has not been easily achieved; we should definitely treasure and protect it.'³⁰⁶

不要等事情发生了又怪领导没打招呼。我们今天的大好局面来之不易,一定要珍惜、维护。

³⁰⁶ Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol.3, p.74

The first sentence is typical of what bureaucratic official leaders say in public to remind people to listen to them. The second sentence is government propaganda after the fall of 'Gang of Four', which officials simply repeat to people, in the same way that officials always do to deliver the message of the central government. This is the language used by people in real life, but employed by Wang Shuo in a totally different situation, yet still carrying its original nuances.

Wang Shuo uses this political vocabulary in ridiculous contexts to satirize the effect of political influence on ordinary people, and at the same time by mocking them seeks to dispel the noxious influence of these political concepts in people's minds. Political language, like politics, had occupied the every day life of ordinary people for decades, leaving little space for individual thought and language. The high density of political language filled everybody's minds. In this context satirizing political language is a natural reaction, yet Wang Shuo is the only contemporary writer to employ political language to satirize official ideology on such a massive scale. Wang Shuo's 'tiaokan' stories include many examples of this kind of language which closely reflects people's social life and mentality in the 1980s, and acts as a record of the language used by the government to educate people at that time.

Appreciation of Wang Shuo's satire is very much dependent on people's familiarity with this political language. As Xueping Zhong says:

'This is perhaps the most brilliant aspect of Wang's writing: his ability to poke fun at the emptiness and absurdity of the official language by having it spoken at the least revered moment, about trivial matters, and by the people least likely to use it. The comical effect of this, however, exists largely as an insider's joke; without being steeped in the milieu of the

language and both the subtle and ostentatious reference points, the reader would have trouble getting the humour.³⁰⁷

Wang Shuo's style of making fun of contemporary political language means that only those who are fully familiar with the language in its original context can really appreciate his works. This limits his popularity. Firstly, the younger generation of Chinese readers who were born in 1970s and 1980s are not be able to understand the context of the language and social background sufficiently to fully appreciate Wang's stories. Wang Shuo has lost his popularity among the younger readership since the late 1990s, although this is partly because society is developing very quickly and fashions too are changing rapidly. The generation gap is causing Wang Shuo's political language in these stories rapidly to lose its popularity in China.

Secondly, his characteristic language style is difficult to translate whilst maintaining the original nuances. The critic Xueping Zhong has pointed out:

'His secret thus also limits Wang's popularity; he can be extremely popular within China, but his humour tends to lose its meaning in translation. What makes him popular is, to a large extent, not translatable. In this sense, Wang will always remain relatively secluded in the Chinese context. Oddly, his stories' not being easily translated may show, in a reverse way, some of the absurdity of the official language.'³⁰⁸

Among the Amazon online reviews, one of the reviewers admitted that he could not understand Chinese sensibility.³⁰⁹ In the case of *Playing for Thrills* the average customer review is two stars. Although *Please Don't Call Me Human* averages five stars and has sold well, it is still not a best-seller in the West. We can see that although they are excellent translations, Western readers unfamiliar with the Chinese

³⁰⁷ Xueping Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p.110

³⁰⁸ Xueping Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged*, p.110

³⁰⁹ www.amazon.co.uk, *Playing for Thrills*, Reviewer: 6304gi@student.gelso.unitn.it from Trento, Italy
'I'm sure there's something in it concerning the Chinese sensibility that I couldn't understand.'

official language and the social context have difficulty identifying and appreciating his ironic references to political ideology.

Concern about Politics

Wang Shuo's stories are filled with colloquial language, and with Beijing local people's 'kan' 侃 style of speaking. 'Kan'侃 means to chat idly: the word has very strong Beijing local colour, reflecting an important aspect of Beijing culture. It is an essential part of life in Beijing, where people enjoy chatting with each other. The topics of their chatting vary but politics tends to feature large in this, Taxi drivers, and stall owners enjoy making comments on political issues, and chatting helps people air their discontent, and reflects the highly politicised Beijing city culture.

Beijing has been capital city through six centuries, and in the 20th century political power in Beijing has changed many times: from the Qing Dynasty to the Republic, from the Japanese invaders to the KMT government and finally to the CCP government. This has made Beijingers the most politically aware, and cynical, people in China.

Beijing people usually treat politics and culture as much more important than the economy. This is a completely different attitude to people in Shanghai, who are very concerned about their lifestyles. Yang Dongping's book *Chengshi jifeng* 城市季风 (Seasonal Winds of the Cities) concentrates on comparisons of the cultural differences between Beijing and Shanghai. Yang Dongping comments:

‘Beijing people are the ones who most worship politics among Chinese people.....Every Beijinger is a politician.’³¹⁰

This political orientation can be seen in the themes writers choose. Writers based in Beijing, including woman writers, are particularly fond of using political themes in their works; examples include such as Wang Meng’s 王蒙 ‘Hard Porridge’, Zhang Jie’s 张洁 *Chenzhong de shebang* 沉重的翅膀 (Leaden Wings) and Cong Weixi’s 从维熙 *Zouchu hundun* 走出混沌 (Out of Chaos). In this context it is not surprising that Wang Shuo is so fond of using political themes and terminology in his stories, including *Please Don’t Call Me Human* and *I Am Your Dad*.

By contrast the Shanghai writer Wang Anyi’s 王安忆 in her representative novel *Changhenge* 长恨歌 (Song of Everlasting Sorrow) tells a different story about Shanghai. She reflects on Shanghai’s economic and social changes from its prosperous past to the present day through a lyrical and moving story about a woman in Shanghai from the 1930s to the 1980s. She reflects the Shanghainese concern with their financial situation in order to maintain their lifestyles. The old woman was murdered in the 1980s by a greedy youth stealing her store of gold bars. In Wang Anyi’s novel, there are few comments on political events even though the story goes through a fifty year history of major political changes in the city. It is almost entirely devoid of political language, and is an urban woman’s life story rather than the political history of a nation that Beijing writers attempt.

Wang Shuo was strongly influenced by political events from his experiences during the Cultural Revolution. He said:

³¹⁰ Yang Dongping 杨东平, *Seasonal Winds of the Cities*, 1994, pp.483-487

'The great influences on me were all political things, including the Lin Biao event which left me in a state of shock; and the 'Gang of Four'. These shocks went far beyond functional or physical damage.'³¹¹

In spite of his obvious political concerns, Sheryle WuDunn reports that Wang Shuo denies his works poses any challenge to the Communist Government. Compared to the dissidents Liu Binyan 刘宾雁 and Su Xiaokang 苏晓康, Wang Shuo's contribution was different. Sheryle WuDunn said:

'Mr. Wang does not espouse a theory of political systems, but in some ways he is a far more subversive critic of urban society than Mr. Su or Liu. He is destructive, poking fun at everything the Communist Party takes seriously without offering any alternative. He romanticizes young, alienated rebels, in much the same way that Jack Kerouac did in the United States. He explores the paradoxes and absurdities of society, as Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut do. Instead of criticizing the Communists for being autocratic, he does what is far more devastating: he mocks them for being uncool.'³¹²

Although Wang Shuo strongly satirizes politics, this is restricted to political phenomena and language; he does not display any political beliefs or ambitions, he does not attempt to interfere in current day politics, and he regards himself as a writer rather than a politician or a dissident. He said to reporter Jamie James how he reacted to current politics:

'There's a very famous dissident named Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波, who tried to persuade me to protest and make petitions and collect signatures, I refused. Now Liu is in a labour camp, and I am here. I was proved right. A writer is a writer. He should stay away from politics.'³¹³

Responsibility for the country and nation has deeply influenced most writers, including the dissidents. Many 1980s dissidents are from the literary field, including Liu Binyan, Bei Dao and Liu Xiaobo. And most of them now have to live overseas.

³¹¹ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, pp.39-40 (对我产生重大影响的, 都是政治的东西. 比如林彪事件, 对我产生了非常大的震动; 还有四人帮, 这种震动, 超过了机能上的身体上的损害.)

³¹² Sheryl WuDunn, 'The Word From China's Kerouac: The Communists Are Uncool', *The New York Times Book Review*, 10 Jan. 1993, p.3 & p.23

³¹³ Jamie James, 'Bad Boy', *The New Yorker*, April 21, 1997, p.53

Some writers, such as Cong Weixi, are not dissidents but are under observation by the authorities. Wang Shuo is included in a government list of 100 authors whose post-1989 works were to be carefully screened before publication.³¹⁴

Wang Shuo has a flexible attitude towards ideological control by the authorities. This is reflected in some of his TV serials and films, such as his early TV serials *Yearning* and *The Stories of Editorial Office*, and the film *A Sigh* (2000). Here Wang Shuo showed his ability to curry favour with government in his works. The woman writer Dai Qing 戴晴, whose works are banned in China, said:

‘Wang Shuo is one of the finest contemporary writers, someone who can use wit and language to betray several decades of ideology that have been forced upon us. But the Government doesn’t fear him because while he destroys, he doesn’t create or build. And he is willing to compromise with the Government.’³¹⁵

Compromising with the government is the way Wang Shuo chooses to put his message across to a wide range of audiences and readers. Even so, during the ‘spiritual civilization’ campaign of 1996, Wang Shuo became a target. The form this ban took was not a formal government document, just public criticism by an ideological leader representing the authorities.³¹⁶ Wang Shuo said: ‘I’ve tried so carefully to avoid making them angry’.³¹⁷ This attitude shows that although Wang Shuo has this rebellious spirit, nevertheless, he has a strong desire to remain active in China, and aims to be a survivor.

³¹⁴ Sheryl WuDunn, ‘The Word From China’s Kerouac: The Communists Are Uncool’, *The New York Times Book Review*, 10 Jan. 1993, p.3 & p.23

³¹⁵ *ibid.*

³¹⁶ Interview with Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, 20/7/2003

³¹⁷ Jamie James, ‘Bad Boy’, *The New Yorker*, April 21, 1997, p.53

Beijing Style

'The Symposium on Beijing Style Literature' held in October 2000, attracted writers, critics and scholars. Writer Zhao Danian 赵大年 pointed out some characteristics of 'Jingwei' 京味 (Beijing Style) literature: using Beijing language to portray Beijing people and events; describing Beijing's environment and customs; exploring Beijing people's special qualities.³¹⁸

Wang Shuo's stories and language style are identified as 'jingwei' 京味 (Beijing style) literature, and he is recognized as the outstanding Beijing style writer after Lao She 老舍, one of the greatest writers in modern Chinese literary history. Wang Shuo's Beijing style language is a reflection of the language of the new generations growing up since the new socialist society of the 1950s. Wang Shuo has said he knows very little about old Beijing language.³¹⁹

Wang Shuo started using oral language in his earliest writing.³²⁰ He emphasized he had learnt Beijing style language from Cao Xueqin's *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.³²¹ He thinks fiction should be written in the living language, allowing people to feel its life and touch it. Wang Shuo's language was less influenced than many writers by translated Western works, because of the importance of language to him, though he has acknowledged his debt to Joseph Heller.

³¹⁸ Li Jing 李静, 'Jingwei wenxue' zouxiang hefang' '京味儿文学'走向何方 (In Which direction is 'Beijing Style Literature' Heading?), *Beijing ribao* 北京日报 (Beijing Daily), 18/10/2000

³¹⁹ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.61

³²⁰ *ibid.*, p.21

³²¹ Wang Shuo 王朔 & Wang Tong 王童, 'Wang Shuo Online', *Story Field*, 2001, vol. 2, p.145

A further factor influencing the oral language style of Beijing writers is the fact that standard Chinese, Mandarin, is based on it. Writers from the South cannot write down their oral language in a nationally comprehensible way, hence they have to use standard written language. Wang Huazhi expresses this:

‘Since the Beijing dialect is relatively the closest to the national language, he (Wang Shuo) can write in his ‘living language’ without worrying about losing his national audience. Yet non-Beijing writers, especially southern writers, always have to struggle between writing in their living colloquial dialects and writing in the national language. In accessing a national readership, Wang Shuo can write in his ‘first language’ while non-Beijing writers have to write in their ‘second language’.³²²

A non-Beijing writer like Wang Anyi uses a written language which cannot reflect Shanghai local colloquial speech. Wang Shuo’s language style takes advantage of the Beijing dialect to deliver vivid and entertaining living language. For example, in the story *I Am Your Dad*, Ma Linsheng thinks to himself: (the words underlined are Beijing dialect.)

‘儿子一番检讨和恭维如同一只温柔的小手轻挠着他的下巴，使他舒服极了，舒服得直想打呼噜。其实他想说的话还没说呢，刚说了个开场白就难过得分了神儿，接着儿子就迅速地服了软儿，全盘承认，搞得他如果再历数儿子的种种不肖就有些不饶人了。’³²³

The self-criticism and flattery of his son just like a small gentle hand around his chin, made him feel so extremely comfortable that he just wanted to snore. In fact, he had not yet spoken the words he wanted to say, he had just started speaking then felt so upset this diverted his attention, and then the son rapidly confessed, admitted everything, if he talked again about all the details of his son’s unworthy conduct it seemed rather unforgiving.

³²² Wang Huazhi, *Problematizing The Nation: The ‘Wang Shuo Phenomenon’ and Contemporary Chinese Culture*, United States: UMI Company, 1999, p.19

³²³ Wang Shuo, *I Am Your Dad, The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 4, p.126

It is this combination of Beijing street language together with the ironical political language that made Wang Shuo's 'tiaokan' style so witty and humorous. Li Donghui expressed views on the characteristics of Wang Shuo's 'tiaokan', saying:

'Wang Shuo's version of tiaokan has several important identifying characteristics, the combination of which has significant effects. It is written in the conversational style of Beijing commoners' street colloquial. It is 'cool', flippant, casual, indifferent and sarcastic, with a generous sprinkling of parody, metaphor, exaggeration, satire and profanity.'³²⁴

Creating a Popular Language

Wang Shuo is not only recording Beijing colloquial language but also creating his own version of it. Such phrases as: 'I am hooligan, who I am afraid of?' 我是流氓我怕谁, 'No matter who it is' 爱谁谁, have passed into every day language. With Wang Shuo Chinese language passed from a means of communication to a definition of the self-image. 'Wang Shuo-esque jeers' were emblazoned on people's cultural T-shirts,³²⁵ including such iconic sentences as: 'I am annoyed, leave me alone.' (烦着呐别理我) 'Burdened with a family' (拉家带口), 'Really Tired' (真累), 'Should I stick with my office job or start up a street business' (到底是上班还是练摊儿). These became renowned Beijing slang. They were so popular and so sensitive in reflecting ordinary people's jaded state of mind that they caused the government to start worrying about the destabilising effect of the 'cultural T-shirt' business. This led to a total ban.³²⁶

³²⁴ Li Donghui, *The 'Phenomenon' of Wang Shuo: A Historico-Literary Consideration*, PhD.

Dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, p.33

³²⁵ Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, University of California, London, 1996. p.268. Also see Geremie Barmé, *In the Red*, p.153

³²⁶ Geremie Barmé, *In the Red*, pp.145-178, Because of strict control and extreme sensitivity after the 4th June 1989 movement, the T-shirt designer and producer Kong Yongqing was arrested and

As a result of Wang Shuo's films, TV serials and newspapers reports about him, his 'tiaokan' style took off and spawned a language revolution. Internet users show off their prowess saying: 'I am an Internet worm, who I am afraid of!' 我是网虫我怕谁. In the recent novel by Wei Hui, *Shanghai Babe*, this transforms into the sentence 'I am a babe (also means treasure) who I am afraid of!' 我是宝贝我怕谁. This has become popularly used by young girls as an expression of confidence in their youth and beauty, and a determination to do what they want.

Wang Shuo's language becomes popular very quickly and spreads to every field. The title of his latest story *It Looks Beautiful* 看上去很美, published in 1999, has become a popular phrase to comment on things, such as the current economic situation. It is even widely quoted by academic articles: a search on the website of Chinese Academic Journals Network (CNKI) 中国学术期刊网, reveals nearly two hundred articles which use the phrase 'Kan shang qu hen mei' 看上去很美.

This popularization is not without its shortcomings. Many who criticize Wang Shuo's articles and books imitate his 'tiaokan' language, including: *Wo shi liumang wo pa shui* 我是流氓我怕谁 (I am Hooligan, Who I am afraid of), *Kankan Wang Shuo* 侃侃王朔 (Chatting About Wang Shuo). These books, published in the early 1990s, are more like lampoons of Wang Shuo rather than academic criticism.³²⁷ People have not managed to use Wang Shuo language style successfully in their academic criticism;

interrogated by the authorities; after discovering that there was no political motivation, the government ordered him and his group to cease printing 'slogans' on T-shirts. He was fined and released.

³²⁷ Xiao Sheng 晓声, *Wo shi liumang wo pa shui* 我是流氓我怕谁 (I Am a Hooligan, Who Am I Afraid of?), Hunan: Shu hai chubanshe, 1993; Zhang Yi 张毅 (ed.), *Kankan Wang Shuo* 侃侃王朔 (Talking About Wang Shuo), Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1993

however some still keep trying, such as the critical work *Critical Papers on Ten Writers* 十作家批判书 published in 1999.³²⁸ The critical article on Wang Shuo is a pastiche of Wang Shuo's own style in its unsuccessful use of the 'tiaokan' style, with little academic value.

The spilling over of Wang Shuo's language style has given it a kind of linguistic hegemony. Many young writers have followed in Wang Shuo's footsteps, using Beijing dialect to write in. These include Ding Tian 丁天, Shi Kang 石康 and Ai Dan 艾丹, and thousands of internet writers have fallen under Wang Shuo's shadow.³²⁹ Endless imitation and repetition have made people bored with this language style. Even Wang Shuo's stories seem repetitious, and since his break from writing, the latest story, *It Looks Beautiful*, has abandoned the 'tiaokan' style.

The critic Wang Yichuan commented on the problem of imitation and repetition of the 'tiaokan' style, saying:

'..... it has lost its original rationale. At the same time, when he (Wang Shuo) gets into self-reproduction and a lack of creativity in the 'tiaokan' language, the charm of this kind of language easily disappears.'³³⁰

Wang Shuo's language style has a powerful effect in demythologizing the old political ideology of society, but it lacks the ability to influence life in the 1990s. 'It is also inevitable that Wang Shuo's language fairytale would draw to an end in the mid-

³²⁸ Zhu Dake 朱大可 & Wu Xuan 吴炫 & Xu Jiang 徐江 & Qin Bazi 秦巴子 (et. al), *Shi zuojia pipanshu* 十作家批判书 (Critical Papers on Ten Writers), Xi'an: Shaanxi Shifan Daxue chubanshe, 1999

³²⁹ Ning Caishen 宁财神, *Youzhong-ni-ya-bie-pao* 有种你丫别跑 (Don't Run If You've Got any Guts), Beijing: Zhishi chubanshe, 2001, p.10

³³⁰ Wang Yichuan 王一川, 'The End of the Language Fairytale', *Study and Exploration*, 1999, vol.3, pp.111-116

1990s.³³¹ Although the fairytale came to an end, versions of his 'tiaokan' language are still very popular on TV, and in films and newspapers.

Stereotyped Characters

Wang Shuo's language achievements are greater than his portrayal of characters in his stories. Wang Shuo mainly uses the first person male narrator in his stories. He, as the protagonist, can more directly portray himself and other people. However, he abandons the possibility of observing the protagonist's behaviour.³³² In Wang Shuo's 'tiaokan' stories, the characters are always a group of scarcely distinguishable young urban people. They have almost same way of talking, their behaviour is basically same; their only difference is their names. Such are the characters Fang Yan, Yu Guan, Ma Qing and Yang Zhong in *The Operators*, *An Attitude* and *You Are Not An Ordinary Man*. Their behaviour and language could be exchanged with each other. These characters are repetitive, and lack distinguishing features.³³³ There are no characteristics that change in the course of the work; there is no inner world or psychological or even physiological description. The characters are just dialogues. The plots too develop with little reason or explanation.

The critic Zhao Ning has criticized the characters in Wang Shuo's stories for all having the same faces, all looking like the protagonist, just like a group of clones of Wang Shuo himself.³³⁴ Female characters in his stories almost all have sad sexual

³³¹ *ibid.*

³³² Zhang Dexiang 张德祥, 'After the Focus Moves Down—Perspectives on Wang Shuo's Literary Concepts', *Review of Contemporary Writers*, 1993, vol. 3, pp.58-65

³³³ Lei Da 雷达, 'On the Wang Shuo Phenomenon', *Writer*, 1989, vol. 3, pp.73-77

³³⁴ Zhao Ning 赵凝, 'Wang Shuo bushi dashu, Wang Shuo shi chentu' 王朔不是大树, 王朔是尘土 (Wang Shuo Is Not A Big Tree, He Is Dust), *Beijing Jishi* 北京纪事 (Beijing Events), 17/09/2001, p.2

experiences, and act as ornaments decorating the lives of men. Such are Li Jiangyun and Liu Yan in *Playing for Thrills* and Li Bailing in *Rubber Man*. Wang Shuo's stories are all male-centred stories, with male protagonists telling stories about young urban males.

Serious or Popular Literature?

Most of Wang Shuo's 'tiaokan' stories are stories of the ridiculous, characteristically based on humour, such as *The Operators*, *Nothing Serious, Please Don't Call Me A Human*, and so on. The characters are mainly 'playboys', and the stories satirize serious, 'killjoy'-type issues like literature, intellectuals and political ideology. It is this lampooning of exalted subjects, taking down a peg or two people who treat themselves very seriously, that makes the stories so effective. Joseph Lau comments:

'The Wang Shuo phenomenon translates into a paradox: the more his writing is dismissed as trivial by the Party 'killjoys', the more relevant it appears to the 'playboys' among his audience.'³³⁵

The pursuit of serious issues in Wang Shuo's stories is not an obstacle to entertaining people and having a good market response, which are an excellent combination.

Geremie Barmé is interested in this aspect of Wang Shuo, he says:

'Looking beyond the superficial humour and limited political subversiveness of Wang's stories, as well as the more simplistic and obvious issues of youth alienation and emotional confusion, I have tried to identify persistent elements of popular cultural myth and demonstrate how they are refracted in the work of one of China's most versatile contemporary writers.'³³⁶

³³⁵ Joseph S.M. Lau, 'China Deconstructs: the Emergence of Counter-Traditions in Recent Chinese Writing', *The Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies*, 1994, vol. 5, pp.25-35

³³⁶ Geremie Barmé, *In The Red*, p.95

Wang Shuo writes about perennially popular themes, such as attitudes to sex, women, money, love and marriage, expressed in an ironic and entertaining way. These attract many readers because these issues are what they are interested in and part of their daily lives. In the story *Playing for Thrills*, the use of the detective story theme, involving a murder case is an example of his use of topics which accord with the popular taste of consumers. The characters take a game-playing attitude towards almost every topic that the rest of society regards as serious. This irreverent competitive angle certainly makes Wang Shuo's fiction more amusing than the earnest morality stories or root-seeking literature that preceded them.

Benjamin L. Liebman thinks the main differences between Wang Shuo and other young writers is that Wang Shuo's experiment takes place in popular literature.³³⁷

Wang Shuo himself explained that the popular elements (sex, women, money, etc.) in his stories are not there because he wanted to include them to attract the attention of readers, but because life had changed and it includes these elements.³³⁸

Apart from these popular elements, there is still strong social and political satire in Wang Shuo's stories which has caused them to be recognised as serious literary works. Wang Shuo satirized writers and the literary world in the story *Nothing Serious*. He wants to be different from them, to be popular in the sense of being known by ordinary people. He says:

'I am not concerned if people praise me or attack me; I do not write for literary critics. If somebody who sells clothes on the street knows my

³³⁷ Benjamin L. Liebman, edited & translated by Dong Zhilin 董之琳, 'Authority and Wang Shuo's Stories' Language', *Review of Contemporary Writer*, vol. 3, 1993, p.74.

³³⁸ Wang Shuo, 'My Stories', *People's Literature*, 1989, vol. 3, p.108

name, I will be very happy. If people watch my films and laugh, I will be very pleased.³³⁹

Nevertheless the intention of being a popular writer who has popular elements in his stories and films does not mean Wang Shuo does not intend to produce works with serious meaning. Although Wang Shuo announced that his works do not have any other purpose than to entertain, however they themselves have negated this statement, and expressed serious views on contemporary Beijing.³⁴⁰ For example, in the novel *Please Don't Call Me Human* people were forced to move out and their traditional Beijing courtyard homes (siheyuan 四合院) were destroyed without any concern for the wishes of the people who lived there, or for protecting traditional architecture and culture.

But the serious elements of Wang Shuo's stories are all overlain by the superficial elements: the entertaining language style and urban young people's fearless pleasure-seeking and money-making lifestyles. If readers cannot understand the deep meaning of Wang Shuo's stories, he at least wants them to smile.³⁴¹

In the Introduction to the latest story, *It Looks Beautiful*, Wang Shuo makes a point of announcing it is pure fabrication.³⁴² This claim to fictionalize is a rejection of functionality, the traditional role of literature, and an affirmation of the value of entertainment. Popular stories have often had very low artistic standards: they have been repetitive and stereotyped works, unworthy of the attentions of intellectuals and critics. Wang Shuo's stories have strong popular elements but retain high artistic and professional standards. His stories and the attitudes towards the world manifested in

³³⁹ Benjamin L. Liebman, edited & translated by Dong Zhilin 董之琳, 'Authority and the Language of Wang Shuo's Stories', *Review of Contemporary Writers*, vol. 3, 1993, p.74

³⁴⁰ *ibid.*

³⁴¹ Wang Shuo, 'My Stories', *People's Literature*, 1989, vol. 3, p.108

³⁴² Wang Shuo, *It Looks Beautiful*, Introduction, p.8

them are very controversial. This has caused critics to have divergent opinions on his works,³⁴³ leading to national discussions and arguments. The debate on whether writers should pursue serious literature or popular literature divided intellectuals, but in the process of this debate commercial culture overwhelmed society.

³⁴³ Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 & Liu Xinwu 刘心武, 'Jiushi niandai wentan de fansi yu huigu' 九十年代文坛的反思与回顾 (Reflections on and Reviews of the 1990s Literary World), *Xinhua wenzhai* 新华文摘 (New China Abstract), 1996, vol. 7, pp.110-115

Chapter III

Wang Shuo and Contemporary Chinese Films and Popular TV Serials

I. Wang Shuo and Contemporary Chinese Films

Wang Shuo's films were released between 1986 and 2002; at least a dozen Wang Shuo films, and many more films imitating Wang Shuo, have been made. In the film world, Wang Shuo has been the writer most involved with the trend to produce the type of commercial films that now dominate the market.

Background to the Chinese Film Industry

China first began making films in 1905, and went through a commercial film period and a Left Wing film period in the 1930s. During the Maoist years between 1949 and 1976, films, as one of the main ideological tools in China, were strictly controlled by the authorities. Film-making was very obviously concerned with the task of education and propaganda in accordance with the spirit of Mao Zedong's talks in Yan'an.³⁴⁴ One type of film concentrated on the class struggle and revolutionary struggle, such as the film *Bai mao nü* 白毛女 (The Girl with White Hair, 1950), exposing and criticising the exploitation of peasants by landlords. A second type of film reflected the theme of civil war; an example is the typical war film *Nan zheng bei zhan* 南征北战 (Fighting the War in the North and South, 1952), which glorified the role of the

³⁴⁴ Mao Zedong (or Mao Tse-Tung) 毛泽东, 'Talks At The Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art', *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 3, pp.69-98

PLA (People's Liberation Army) generals and soldiers during the war with the KMT forces. A third type of film portrayed wartime heroes; an example is the film *Dong Cunrui* 董存瑞 (1955), about a hero in the civil war.

During the Cultural Revolution, the film world was also a political battlefield, and the film industry was seriously damaged. From 1966 to 1973, film production was stopped completely throughout the country, and no feature films at all were made during those seven years.³⁴⁵ The only films made during that time were of the 'revolutionary model performance works' 革命样板戏 (*geming yangban xi*), which were just recorded directly from the stage. In 1973, the central government ordered the resumption of feature film production. Between 1973 and 1976, 76 films were made, most of which were based on 'theme first' 主题先行 (*zhuti xianxing*) formalism and were propaganda films.

Between 1949 and 1976, China made 633 films, an average of fewer than 24 films a year. Between 1977 and 1987, 1102 films were made, an average of more than 110 films a year.³⁴⁶ After the beginning of the 1980s, most of the films were made from 'Scar Literature' (Shanghen wenxue 伤痕文学) and 'Introspection Literature' (Fansi wenxue 反思文学); these were called 'Scar Films' and 'Introspection Films' respectively, and reflected people's sufferings as a result of the constant succession of political movements. Films in this period illustrated the themes of 'wanting the motherland to become rich and civilised quickly; elimination of the Leftist line and

³⁴⁵ Peng Jixiang 彭吉象 (ed.), *Yingshi jianshang* 影视鉴赏 (The Appreciation of Film and TV), p.188

³⁴⁶ Sun Qinhua 孙钦华, 'Zhongguo xiandai dianying liuxiang tance' 中国现代电影流向探测 (Survey of Trends in Chinese Modern Film), Huang Shixian 黄式宪 (ed.), *Dianying dianshi zouxiang ershiyi shiji* 电影电视走向21世纪 (Film and TV Toward the 21st Century), pp.3-15

the remnants of feudalism and not repeating the mistakes of history.³⁴⁷ These films widely influenced society in terms of the trend towards cultural introspection.

In 1983, the film *Yi ge he ba ge* 一个和八个 (One and Eight), directed by Zhang Junzhao 张军钊 was the first film made by the emerging fifth generation film directors, and was followed by many other films, such as *Huang tudi* 黄土地 (Yellow Earth), directed by Chen Kaige in 1984,³⁴⁸ and *Hong Gaoliang* 红高粱 (Red Sorghum), directed by Zhang Yimou in 1987.³⁴⁹ The fifth generation film directors, like the fourth generation directors,³⁵⁰ had a deeply held consciousness of the suffering of the people and a feeling of social responsibility. They followed the 'root-seeking' agenda in the literary field, and reflected the 'culture fever' of that time. Their films criticised the old ethical code, and followed their personal artistic pursuits and characteristics; an example is Zhang Yimou's film *Da hong denglong gaogao gua* 大红灯笼高高挂 (Raise up the Red Lantern, 1991). This is an artistic film which is considered to have captured a spirit of rebellion towards decadent society. The fifth generation art films are intellectual films and have won awards at the major international film festivals. However they were unable to attract large enough audiences of ordinary people to make them successful in the Chinese market; this was

³⁴⁷ Ma Debo 马德波, 'Ying yun huan liu' 影运环流 (The Fortunes of the Film Industry Go Round in a Circle), Zhongguo Dianyingjia Xiehui Dianyingshi Yanjiubu 中国电影家协会电影史研究部 (Chinese Film Artists Association Film History Research Department) (ed.), *Lishi yu xianzhuang* 历史与现状 (History and the Current Situation), pp.1-32

³⁴⁸ Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 was born in Beijing in 1953, his father was a film director at the Beijing Film Factory. He grew up during the Cultural Revolution, went to work in the countryside in Yunnan province, and he went back to Beijing in 1976. He graduated from the Beijing Film Institute in 1982. In 1985, his film *Yellow Earth* made him famous in international film circles, and his film *Farewell My Concubine* won the best film award at Cannes in 1993.

³⁴⁹ Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 was born in Xi'an on 14th November 1951. He graduated from the Beijing Film Institute in 1982. He was originally a photographer. He is classified as a member of 5th generation film directors; his films include *Red Sorghum*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *The Story of Qiuju*, *To Live*, etc.

³⁵⁰ Xie Jin 谢晋 is one of the 4th generation film directors, his films include *Furong zhen* 芙蓉镇 (A Small Town Called Hibiscus), *Mumaren* 牧马人 (Herdsmen), *Zuihou de guizu* 最后的贵族 (The Last Nobles).

essential for resolving the financial crisis in the film industry. The film industry has had to explore a new road in order to survive and develop.

Entertainment Films

The development of entertainment films encountered many difficulties. The people who made these films were in constant danger of being criticised politically. From 1980 onwards, a number of popular entertainment films emerged in China, such as the film *Shenmi de dafo* 神秘的大佛 (Mysterious Buddha, 1980) and *Shaolin si* 少林寺 (Shaolin Temple, 1982). However, the authorities and the critics did not appreciate these films. Zhang Huaxun 张华勋, the director of the film *Mysterious Buddha*, was criticised for making a film ‘dripping with blood’ 血淋淋, that involved crude fighting scenes, and pandered to the poor taste of the audience, and for pursuing box office success. He made another entertainment film called *Wulin zhi* 武林志 (The Chronicles of the Martial Fraternity, 1983), which was not allowed to be advertised publicly. Zhang Huaxun was frustrated and decided to give up making entertainment films.³⁵¹

Following the development of the commercial economy, China was changing from a planned economy to a market economy, and all the film factories started to assume independent responsibility for their profits and losses. Under this policy, film studios would only make films from which they could expect to make a profit. From the mid-

³⁵¹ Chen Mo 陈墨, ‘Xinshiqi dianying chuanguo yu shichang guannian’ 新时期电影创作与市场观念 (New Era Film Creation and Market Concepts), *Dangdai dianying* 当代电影 (Contemporary Film), 1998, vol. 6, pp.19-25, also see Ni Zhen 倪震, *Gaige yu zhongguo dianying* 改革与中国电影 (Reform and Chinese Film), p.161

1980s, the film industry was facing a crisis, and from 1984 to 1985, audiences slumped to 5.2 billion (person visits) per year,³⁵² so the film economy experienced a serious downturn. This situation continued into 1986, with audience numbers continually dropping. A large number of cinemas became used for other businesses, such as dance halls or for showing videos, etc. Several big film studios, such as the Beijing Film Studios and the Changchun Film Studios, made losses every year and so were in debt, and unable pay staff salaries. In order to make a living, film studios had to make popular films, including martial arts films, detective films and action films. Therefore a large number of poor quality and low standard films flooded the market. The audiences were put off by these films, so the film industry lost even more audience, and this became a vicious circle. The film world was facing serious problems in other aspects, such as a backward ideology, and a lack of understanding of modern film theory, etc. In the 1980s, Western contemporary film theories were introduced into China, and film makers tried to make avant-garde films and experimental films which few people could understand, and which made the market situation even worse.

Economic problems became the biggest headache for the film world. Some entertainment films were clearly welcomed by audiences, and they were often represented in the top ten films with regard to number of copies sold and box office income.³⁵³ Such films were Zhang Huaxun's *Mysterious Buddha* and Zhou Xiaowen's 周晓文 *Zuihou de fengkuang* 最后的疯狂 (The Final Madness, 1987). The time came

³⁵² Huang, Shixian 黄式宪, 'Zhongguo yingtian: wenhua zhuanxing yu yishu shengji' 中国影坛: 文化转型与艺术生机 (The Chinese Film World: Cultural Transition and Artistic Life), *Lishi yu xianzhuang* 历史与现状 (History and the Current Situation), pp.269-281

³⁵³ Chen Mo 陈墨, 'New Era Film Creation and Market Concepts', *Contemporary Film*, 1998, vol. 6, pp.19-25

when the authorities and the critics could no longer block or ignore entertainment films.

From 1987, there was a major discussion about entertainment films in the magazine *Contemporary Film* (Dangdai dianying), in the column 'Dialogue: Entertainment Films'. Film-makers, official leaders and critics took part in the discussions. During these discussions, the idea that entertainment films should form the major part of the film industry was raised; and questions about how art films could be combined with entertainment films were discussed. The discussions also addressed criticisms of poor quality, vulgar and badly made films; and worries that the 'film industry would be led astray' were voiced.³⁵⁴ As a result of these discussions, there were new developments, leading entertainment films to a new peak in 1988.

It was difficult for entertainment films to avoid criticisms, for pandering to people's poor taste, for being made in a rough and slipshod way, etc. When the new type of entertainment films appeared, they were more refined in terms of their content, which dealt mainly with the lives of ordinary young people. An example was the film *Yaogun qingnian* 摇滚青年 (Rock and Roll Youth, 1987) directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮, and Wang Shuo's four films of 1988, which all appeared as part of this new tide of entertainment films. Since then, the Chinese film industry has returned to the track of commercial films after leaving it several decades earlier.

³⁵⁴ Cai Shiyong 蔡师勇, 'Yulepian'—xinchao dianying de ling yi fu miankong '娱乐片'—新潮电影的另一幅面孔, 'Entertainment Films—Another Face of the Film New Wave', *Wenyi lilun yu piping* 文艺理论与批评 (Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art), 1996, vol. 4, pp.55-63

Making Wang Shuo's Early Films

While martial arts films, detective films and action films were flooding the market, Wang Shuo's stories about modern urban young people's lives during the reform period appeared relatively fresh, with vivid dialogues and clearly described changing scenes, which exactly filled the need for a new type of entertainment film, appreciated and adopted by young film directors. It is surprising to find that more than eight of Wang Shuo's stories were designated to be made into films at almost the same time.³⁵⁵ Wang Shuo's stories were treated as a new resource by the film world to fulfil their urgent needs. In the end, four films were made from Wang Shuo's stories in 1988,³⁵⁶ which has been called the 'Wang Shuo year' 王朔年 in the Chinese film world. Wang Shuo's films contain no signs of resisting the current political system or strongly ironic comments on, or criticisms of, political issues, having purely entertainment and commercial value.

Wang Shuo's films encountered certain difficulties in making, as in the case of *Samsara*. The fifth generation film director Huang Jianxin 黄建新 had shown his appreciation of the work: 'I like the story's novel angle of observing life and its honest expression of feelings.'³⁵⁷ Wang Shuo was invited to the Xi'an Film Studios to write the script, which was finished in March 1986. However, because two other films made by Xi'an Film Studios had encountered political difficulties, the leaders of the film studios thought that although the script was good, under the circumstances they could not agree to begin making the film. In 1987, the Xi'an Film studios agreed that

³⁵⁵ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.66

³⁵⁶ See Chapter I

³⁵⁷ Huang Jianxin 黄建新, 'Lunhui' zaji' <轮回>杂记 (About *Samsara*), *Qingchun wuhui* 青春无悔 (A Youth of No Regret), p.372 (我喜欢小说观察人生的新奇和情感表露的真切)

Huang Jianxin could begin preparations, but before they started shooting, he was told to stop again because of the economic situation. Then the Beijing film director Xie Fei 谢飞 went to Xi'an and read the script, thought it was good, and talked to the leaders of the film studios. Shooting for *Samsara* finally started in May 1988.³⁵⁸

Another fifth generation film director, Xia Gang 夏刚, insisted that 'urban films' were different from the rural films of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, and emphasised his feelings about urban people's emotions:

'I like to re-experience these emotions every time I create a work, I am moved by these emotions, puzzled by these emotions and attracted by these emotions.'³⁵⁹

Xia Gang chose to make the Wang Shuo film *Half Seawater and Half Fire* (1988) as his first-ever film.

In December 1988, the Chinese Film Art Research Centre and the film magazine *Contemporary Film* held a 'Chinese Contemporary Entertainment Film Symposium', which pushed for the development of the entertainment film. Deputy minister of the TV and Broadcasting Department, Chen Haosu 陈昊苏, expressed his views on the three functions of film:

'The entertainment function is the original source, it is the foundation, while the artistic and educational functions are extensions, developments...resuming the original source of film art, which is respect for the characteristics of film as the foundation of people's entertainment.....we should put the entertainment function in prime

³⁵⁸ Chai Xiaofeng 柴效锋, Ji Min 纪珉 & Lu Xiaoming 吕晓明 (eds.) *Huang Jianxin—Nianqing de yanjing* 黄建新—年轻的眼睛 (Huang Jianxin—Young Eyes), pp.24-25.

³⁵⁹ Wang Qun 王群, 'Miandui xiandai wenming de sikao—Xinshiqi dushi dianying chuanguo tantao' 面对现代文明的思考—新时期都市电影创作探讨 (The Thinking Facing Modern Civilisation—Discussion of New Era Urban Film Making), *Dangdai dianying* 当代电影 (Contemporary Film), 1999, vol.5, pp.74-79 (我喜欢在每一次创作中重新体验这些情感, 我被那些情感所感动, 也被那些情感所困惑, 更被那些情感所吸引.)

position in films.....advocating that artists should set up a concept of 'entertainment life'.³⁶⁰

The call to emancipate people's minds and the new flexible policies meant that Wang Shuo's films coincided with a positive trend in entertainment film making, and that they were encouraged by the authorities.

Wang Shuo's Film *The Operators*

The film *The Operators* 顽主 was the best in terms of its interpretation of the original meaning and spirit of Wang's book; the film retains his sense of the ridiculous and his mocking style under the direction of Mi Jiashan 米家山. Wang Shuo himself was the editor of *The Operators*. It is 'the film version of Wang Shuo' (电影版的王朔).³⁶¹

The characters in the story are real people living real live, and some Beijing scenes are included in the film, such as the International Exhibition Centre, the Great Wall Hotel, etc. The story in the film is almost the same as in the book. The principal style of language is absurdist and many sentences remain the same as in the book. The film has a relaxed, light comedy atmosphere. The story has a ridiculous ending in the film: the 'Three T' company is forced to close down, but a long queue in front of the company's gate shows that many people are facing difficulties in life and all need the 'Three T' company's help. The film version extended the element of farce in the original story to create an even more introspective effect.

³⁶⁰ Ma Debo 马德波, 'Ying yun huan liu' 影运环流 (The Fortunes of the Film Industry Go Round in a Circle), *Lishi yu xianzhuang* 历史与现状 (History and the Current Situation), pp.1-32

³⁶¹ Dai Jinhua, *Wu zhong fengjing* 雾中风景 (Scenes in the Fog), p.206

The film director Mi Jia Shan applauded the young people in Wang Shuo's *The Operators*:

'I am not sure I can live completely like the Operators, however I worship their spirit of rebelling against tradition: seen, for example, in their philosophical attitude to life.'³⁶²

The film appears to have nothing to do with politics, except in the fashion show scene before the fake writer's award ceremony, which is developed in more detail than in the original story. The fashion show starts with two 'acrobatic clown' (武丑) comedians from a Peking Opera getting on the stage. They fight each other, holding on to each other and rolling like a ball up and down; then models appear wearing modern clothes and walk along the T-shaped stage; then young people appear wearing 1920s and 1930s clothes and throw propaganda sheets into the air, representing the revolutionary young people, and they call for people to wake up and fight the Japanese and KMT regimes. Red Guards hold a 'red treasure book' (红宝书),³⁶³ and wave their hats and leather belts; a Red Guard raises her hand, shouting at the figure with a white face who is wearing a Peking Opera costume,³⁶⁴ while the emperor from the Peking Opera is followed by Red Guards trying to beat him up. This shows Red Guards using armed force to destroy both people's lives and traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution. The old landlord and his young wife shout at a peasant, and the peasant shouts back at them, showing the class struggle between landlord and peasant; CCP soldiers point their rifles at KMT military officers who hold handguns in their hands. A traffic policeman directs the traffic; an old traditional-looking man holds a teapot in one hand and a fan in the other, pointing critically at modern young

³⁶² Haima Yingshi Chuangzuo Zhongxin 海马影视创作中心 (ed.), *A Youth of No Regret*, p.372. (我并—不一定能够完全象影片中的顽主那样去生活,但我对他们反叛传统的精神如达观的生活态度很向往.)

³⁶³ The 'Red treasure book' is Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 'little red book' of quotations.

³⁶⁴ White facial make-up indicates a treacherous court official in Peking Opera.

people and female bodybuilders in bikinis; this shows how decadent traditional morality cannot stand up to new modern lifestyles. Young boys appear doing a break-dance (霹雳舞), a culture that was very fashionable in China in the 1980s, and representing the appreciation of America. This montage represents what the Chinese people have experienced since the beginning of the 20th century; the scene mixes political, historical and social phenomena together, accompanied by gentle and melancholy music.

And then, after this montage, disco music begins with a light and fast rhythm, and everybody on the stage is dancing together: the peasant is dancing with the landlord, indicating that the conflict between peasant and landlord has disappeared, since landlords do not exist any more in China; the Red Guards are dancing with the people in Peking Opera costumes, the Cultural Revolution has been stopped, the young people do not fight any more; the old traditional-looking man seems to have a heart attack and almost falls to the floor, and is held and helped by other people to take heart medicine, suggesting that the old traditional moral standards are not suitable for modern life; all the military personnel from both CCP and KMT sides put their heads together, appearing to reach an agreement, four people are laughing and shaking hands, then they are dancing hand in hand around the traffic policeman, which reveals that the years of battle between the CCP and the KMT have ended, China and Taiwan start to talk peacefully, acting like friends when they meet, which shows that the political conflict has ended. All the wars, class struggles and political movements are over, people dance happily to an English pop song. Western culture and Western values are now influencing people: not only have people's clothes changed dramatically but also the way in which people feel about life has changed; colourful

fashionable designer clothes have replaced the uniforms associated with each class (peasant, landlord), military forces (soldiers' CCP uniforms and military officers' KMT uniforms), the traffic policeman' uniform, the Red Guards' clothes which imitate military uniforms, the young revolutionary people's gowns, etc. The film cleverly employs this method to allow people to represent particular figures in the history of the 20th century.

It is thus a highly symbolic fashion stage, which shows the ups and downs of modern history; it is a historical and political stage, and it is also a stage for lives of the people. The historical and political situations have changed dramatically, the fights, the struggles and the hatred have all disappeared, a transformation of the official propaganda of the past, leaving ideology in confusion. The fashion show demonstrates this phenomenon visually in a very short time in an extremely effective way. It is a unique and highly successful effect on the part of the film director.

The film demonstrates an ironic attitude towards intellectuals, just as the original story does. This appears for example in the mockery directed at the hypocritical morality professor Zhao Yaoshun, who represents rigid official ideology, educating young people to conform to the official system of values and morality, while young people just make jokes about him.³⁶⁵ The film satirises the traditional language of ideology, for instance, when Zhao Yaoshun advises young people to read more books:

³⁶⁵ When the three young people see Zhao Yaoshun standing in the street staring at a young girl walking by, they play a joke on him, by telling him that they have made a date for him to meet a young girl. Zhao Yaoshun believes them and goes to the Great Wall Hotel to see the girl. Zhao is a married man and he talks about morals to young people all the time, so this plot is an attempt to reveal Zhao's hypocrisy.

‘A book is a magic remedy which will solve all your problems.....If you do not like reading books, you can make more friends; knowledgeable friends can certainly benefit people.’³⁶⁶

This kind of clichéd propaganda puts off young people. In the film the strong conflicts of emotion in the book produced by official ideology are tempered by the pleasant moving pictures of the entertaining film. The sharp criticisms implicit in Wang Shuo’s book are covered up or diluted in the film. This is how Wang Shuo films were able to pass the strict censorship system.

The Debate about Wang Shuo Films

Wang Shuo’s stories suited the aims of the film directors. The protagonists in his stories are ordinary people, not heroes or villains. They speak in a humorous way, and the plot is developed in a very clear manner with scenes which are easy to visualise.

Wang Shuo’s films reflect the rebellious spirit characteristic of young people. The young people in the films, such as Shi Yi (in *Samsara*), Zhang Ming (in *Half Seawater Half Fire*), and Yu Guan (in *The Operators*), take a cynical attitude to life. They have no formal job and it is difficult for them to find a position in society; they resist orthodox concepts; they have a conflict mentality with regard to society. In the films *Samsara* and *A Big Breath*, the main protagonists both choose to give up their lives at the end of the films, an example of Wang Shuo’s films going a step further than his books. The directors of these films wanted to portray these young people as having come to the conclusion that their empty lives are meaningless, and

³⁶⁶ From the film *The Operators*. (书是消除烦恼的灵丹妙药...不看书就多交几个朋友, 知识广博的朋友照样可以使人受益非浅)

demonstrate their anti-social attitude and their opposition to society's values with a tragic ending.

One criticism is that these characters 'adopt the attitude of playing at life', and that the films do not reflect the truth about the lives of these characters. It has also been suggested that some film-makers come close to the attitude of the 'operators' (顽主), and fail to overcome this mentality.³⁶⁷ However, the critic Chen Xiaoming thinks that the young people in Wang Shuo's films are the rebels and challengers to modern life, that they have wild dreams of a commercial society and are full of an original life force.³⁶⁸

The Chinese Film Critics' Association, the *Chinese Film News* and *Film Art* held a 'Symposium on Wang Shuo's Films' in March 1989 to discuss Wang Shuo's four films. There were two principal opinions. Some people criticised the films for having a negative attitude towards the characters, content and meaning. They thought that some of the characters were morally degenerate and rather disgraceful, and that the films did not have any educational significance, and were therefore low-level films of poor quality in terms of ideology and cultural characteristics. By contrast, other people thought that Wang Shuo's films were refined, and had moral and educational significance. In their opinion, these films use a 'tiaokan' attitude to reveal meaning of

³⁶⁷ Ming Qi 鸣岐, 'Zhong shuo fenyun 'Wang Shuo re'' 众说纷纭 '王朔热' (Various Opinions on the 'Wang Shuo Craze'), *Zuopin yu zhengming* 作品与争鸣 (Works and Debates), 1989, vol. 9, pp.79-80.

³⁶⁸ Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, 'Ya wenhua: Wang Shuo de shengming chongli' 亚文化: 王朔的生命冲力 (Subculture: Wang Shuo's Impulsive Life Force), *Qingchun wuhui: Wang Shuo yinshi zuopin ji* 青春无悔: 王朔影视作品集 (A Youth of No Regret: Collected Works of Wang Shuo's Films and TV Serials), Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1993, pp.363-365

life and the ills of society.³⁶⁹ And many people joined in the discussion by writing articles to newspapers and magazines.

Wang Shuo's stories helped film directors to explore a different road to the existing film formula. The value of Wang Shuo's films lies in allowing society to understand more about the younger generation, and these films adopt an absurdist style in order to touch on sensitive fields such as forbidden political and sexual topics. Film directors felt that the entertaining and witty dialogues of the characters was one of the important elements of Wang Shuo's stories that could be used to create a relaxed atmosphere.

The critic Shao Mujun suggested the film directors' motivation in making these films from Wang Shuo's books:

'However, these film directors who aim to put across new ideas and not follow the vulgar trend, urgently want to explore a rare theme, and hope to find a new road which can console audiences and let off steam, but which are also close to reality and do not offend the authorities and therefore will not be banned.'³⁷⁰

By contrast, the critic Zuo Shula criticised Shao Mujun's comments, and asked, since he usually advocated use of the 'Hollywood formula' why he could not tolerate Wang Shuo's films:

'The minor differences between the protagonists in Hollywood films and the protagonists in Wang Shuo's films are those between foreign

³⁶⁹ Zuo Shula 左舒拉, 'Genju Wang Shuo xiaoshuo gaibian de si bu yingpian yinqi relie zhenglun' 根据王朔小说改编的四部影片引起热烈争论 (The Four Films Adapted from Wang Shuo's Stories Caused a Lively Debate), *Dazhong dianying* 大众电影 (Popular Film), 1989, vol. 4, p.17; Also see Ming Qi 鸣岐, 'Zhongshuofenyun 'Wang Shuo re'' 众说纷纭 '王朔热' (Various Opinions on the 'Wang Shuo Craze'), *Zuopin yu zhengming* 作品与争鸣 (Works and Debates), 1989, vol. 9, pp.79-80

³⁷⁰ Shao Mujun 邵牧君, 'Wang Shuo dianying re yuan he er qi' 王朔电影热缘何而起? (Why has the Wang Shuo Film Craze Arisen?) *A Youth of No Regret*, pp. 366-368

'hooligans' and native 'hooligans', so why does Mr. Shao appreciate the former and criticise the latter?'³⁷¹

While Wang Shuo's films remained controversial, numerous film directors invited Wang Shuo to write for them, especially the younger fifth generation art film directors, such as Zhang Yimou, who were happy to court controversy to attract audiences.

Influences of Wang Shuo's Early Films:

A. Language

Wang consciously and successfully attracted audiences. 'Wang Shuo's commodity is language: more specifically, his art of repartee, his glib tongue.'³⁷² The style of language used in the films is the same style as that used by Wang Shuo in his stories.³⁷³ Since it was being used by actors and actresses, this language quickly spread and became accepted by ordinary people, and the actors talked about the influence of Wang Shuo's use of language on their performances. Actor Liang Tian 梁天 said:

'Looking at Wang Shuo now, I think his scripts are very good in terms of language, very fast, and very new. When you perform them you are always in a state of excitement, because the language is the character.'³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ Zuo Shula 左舒拉, 'Yougan yu Shao Mujun dui Wang Shuo dianying de pingjia' 有感于邵牧君对王朔电影的评价 (On Shao Mujun's Comments about Wang Shuo's Films), *Zhongguo dianying bao* 中国电影报 (China Film Newspaper), 15/04/1989, quoted from Ming Qi 鸣岐, 'Various Opinions on the 'Wang Shuo Craze'', *Works and Debates*, 1989, vol. 9, pp.79-80

³⁷² Claire Huot, *China's New Cultural Scene*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p.50

³⁷³ See Chapter II Writing style

³⁷⁴ Liang Tian 梁天, 'Jiechu qingnian Wang Shuo' 杰出青年王朔 (The Outstanding Young People Wang Shuo), Liang Huan 梁欢 (ed.), *Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes*, p.153-158 (而且现在看王朔, 我觉得他的剧本主要就好在语言, 特别快, 特别新. 表演起来总是处于一种兴奋状态. 因为语言就是人物)

The language used in the films is particularly important in portraying the characters, and Wang is good at using colloquial street language, a living language for the actors in the films.

Ying Da writes that Wang Shuo's dialogues are always easy and flowing, a stream of witticisms, that they are completely different from the usual 'written style' scripts. For the actors it is easy to speak naturally, adopting the correct cadences, and pausing in the right places. Actors have the pleasing feeling that their performance skills have greatly improved. Wang Shuo's use of language is also an important reason why his stories are so popular in the film world; it is no coincidence that Wang Shuo's screenplays have created stars in the world of TV & film.³⁷⁵

B. Ordinary-looking Actors

The old concept of film actors and actresses was that they should be handsome or beautiful. Wang Shuo's films broke through these old concepts and used ordinary-looking actors and actresses. These actors were called 'ugly stars' (丑星). In the past, characters were made up (脸谱化) in films, so that actors playing negative roles (bad people) were ugly, while those playing positive roles (good people) were handsome or beautiful. Thus most of the audience was able to determine who was good and who was bad at the beginning of the film. Good and bad people were distinguished simply

³⁷⁵ Ying Da 英达, 'Wang Shuo de yuyan' 王朔的语言 (Wang Shuo's Language), Liang Tian 梁天 (ed.), *Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes*, p.116-120

(而王朔的台词, 从来流畅隽永, 妙语连珠, 全然不同于我们通常拿到的那种以'书面语'写成的, 被演员们称之为'不说人话'的剧本。读王朔的词, 演王朔的戏, 以往那些重音的分析, 逻辑的寻找, 断句的苦恼等等表演者的种种头疼, 皆霍然痊愈, 甚至自觉演技陡增, 起码也要夸这台词一句: '顺嘴!' '上口', 故尔王朔戏是当今影视界造星之源并非偶然, 君不见多少'大腕儿'是倚王朔戏起家的?)

and easily by their make-up and their facial movements and unnatural expressions. This following of Peking Opera customs arose from propaganda requirements, and people were sick of this long standing unnatural and simplistic approach. It was still an influential restriction in the film-maker's mind in 1980s films. The most handsome man was always the main actor and the best person, making the film surreal, and keeping it divorced from the lives and reality of ordinary people.

In the film *The Operators*, the actors Ge You 葛尤,³⁷⁶ Liang Tian 梁天, and Zhang Guoli 张国立 who played the three main roles in the film all became famous as a result. The three actors were just ordinary-looking people, which made them closer to real life. Ge You offered his opinion that an actor's appearance should not be stereotyped:

'If you look at people's appearances, where are there so many handsome men? Don't the majority of people have the same kind of appearance as us? They call us ugly stars because there is a problem with the criteria. Therefore performing in Wang Shuo's works for these actors and actresses was a kind of breakthrough; they did not use appearance as a criterion, which made his characters closer to the people and to reality.'³⁷⁷

Although the choice of actors is down to the casting director, Wang Shuo's stories and film scripts create the basic situation, and the characters are not portrayed as clear cut good or bad people, they are just ordinary people with a sense of humour; they are not

³⁷⁶ After acting in Wang Shuo's films, Ge You has acted in many films and TV serials, including Zhang Yimou's film *To Live* (活着) which won him best actor at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995. Ge You also acted in Wang Shuo's famous TV serial *The Stories of the Editorial Office*, and in the Wang Shuo-style 'new year greeting films' directed by Feng Xiaogang, which really made him the most popular actor in China. He has the ability to achieve the best box office results, and he is the number one actor in China today. He is the best actor for Wang Shuo's style of characters, making the dialogues even more interesting and humorous.

³⁷⁷ Ge You 至仇, 'Wang Shuo ye zai bian' 王朔也在变 (Wang Shuo Is also Changing), Liang Tian 梁天 (ed.), *Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes*, p.174-178 (就从长相上看吧, 会儿有那么多氓亮的? 大多转人不也就是我们这种长相喽? 说我们是姐星, 那是标准定得有问题. 所以说从演王朔作品的这些演安本身来际也是一种条件, 不再把社表作为一种标准, 这就更使得他的人物有一种钱切感, 真实感.)

hypocritical or pretending to be dignified. The practice of selecting good-looking actors and actresses was discontinued.

C. Performing

The method of performing and of being humorous in Wang Shuo's films changed actors' concepts of comedy. The actor Liang Tian talked about the changes in his performance style after acting in *The Operators*:

'I can say that the film *The Operators* was an important turning point for my performing style. Before *The Operators*, I had performed in some films, such as *Erzi kaidian* 二子开店 (Erzi Opens A Shop), etc. In that period my performance was limited to a superficially funny performance, using facial changes to curry favour with the audience. To me *The Operators* was an unexpected gain.'³⁷⁸

A superficially funny performance is very common in films. Wang Shuo's films lead actors to use witty conversation to create a genuinely humorous atmosphere and express people's ideas. Liang Tian commented on his improvement as an actor as a result of this:

'When I look back, the film *The Operators* resulted in an improvement in me as an actor. It broke through the existing understanding of comedy and humour, completely broke through. I think Wang Shuo's stuff is quite advanced humour, and completely modern, especially in its lively expression of young urban people's mentality; it is extremely vivid and incisive.'³⁷⁹

³⁷⁸ Liang Tian 梁天, 'Jiechu qingnian Wang Shuo' 给出青年王朔 (The Outstanding Young People Wang Shuo), Liang Tian 梁天(ed.), *Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes*, p.153-158 (可以这么说, <顽主> 对于我的表演风格是一个重要转筒. 在<顽主>之前, 已经演过一些影话, 象<收子开徐>, 但那个阶花还只是局限于表面化的心跳表演, 以脸部变化化好观众. 而<顽主>对于我应该说是一生意必的收获.)

³⁷⁹ *ibid.* (那么现在回想, <顽主>对于我作为演安本身来际是一个提高. 才流了对喜剧或者说四季的那种认识, 完全才流, 王朔的这种东西, 我觉得是比层高级的四季, 而且完全是现代的, 千其对于城市青年的心态表现得特别生动, 特别动物凶致)

Ge You puts this down to acting in Wang's films. It was then that film circles started to notice him and he began to get more contracts, transforming his life.³⁸⁰

D. 'Tiaokan' Films

At the beginning of the 1990s, Li Ruihuan 李瑞环, a member of the Politburo in charge of ideology, admitted that entertainment and leisure are intrinsic aspects of literature and art.³⁸¹ The people had had decades of political education, asceticism and class struggle, and they preferred films that reflected reality and improvements in life, and which demonstrated a certain level of individualism and hedonism. The film world now contained more freedom and a more vivid atmosphere than before.

Making a Wang Shuo film became an ambition of fifth generation film directors as they tried to shift their focus from art films to commercial films; this included Zhang Yimou. With most of his films having been located in rural areas, Zhang hoped to film Wang Shuo's work in order to achieve his ambition of making urban commercial movies. Zhang Yimou was interested in Wang's 'hooligan' literature, and made several attempts to film Wang's works, but somehow none came to fruition, including Wang's story 'The Operators', the novel *Please Don't Call Me Human*,³⁸² the story 'I Am Your Dad'.³⁸³

³⁸⁰ Ge You 至仇, 'Wang Shuo ye zai bian' 王朔也在变 (Wang Shuo Is also Changing), Liang Tian 梁天(ed.), *Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes*, p.174-178 (从我本人来际, 演王朔的东西对我是一个重要的转如. 在<顽主>之前我演了四部电影, 没什么影响. 从这部片子才让至少是猛里的导演们开始注意上了我, 当时提名了最爸金光灿男配角, 烂点儿就得了. 然后来约就多了.)

³⁸¹ Tao Dongfeng 失东风, *Shehui zhuanxingqi shenmei wenhua yanjiu* 社会转胜期走美文化中峰 (Research on Aesthetic Culture in a Transitional Society), p.86

³⁸² Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.54

³⁸³ Jiang Wen, 'The World Through the Eyes of Jiang Wen', *Chinese Literature*, Autumn 1993, p.164-172; Also see Wang Bin 王子, *Zhang Yimou zhe ge ren* 张艺挑这个人 (Zhang Yimou as a Person), Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe 团结出版社, 1998, p.31

More Wang Shuo films, and films imitating Wang Shuo, had been made, and were called 'tiaokan' films, after the 'tiaokan' language style used in them.³⁸⁴ Wang Shuo's films include *Tianshi yu mogui* 天使与魔鬼 (The Angel and the Ghost), directed by Ling Qiwei 凌奇伟 in 1987; *Qingchun wuhui* 青春无悔 (A Youth of No Regret), directed by Zhao Xiaowen 周晓文 in 1991; *Shenmi fuqi* 神秘夫妻 (The Mysterious Husband and Wife), directed by Li Ziyu 李子羽 in 1991; and *Yong shi wo ai* 永失我爱 (Losing My Love Forever), directed by Feng Xiaogang in 1993.

Films in imitation of the Wang Shuo style include *Da sa ba* 大撒把 (Relax Control, 1992), directed by Xia Gang, *Lihun dazhan* 离婚大战 (Divorce Wars, 1992), directed by Chen Guoxing 陈国星, *Zhanzhile bie paxia* 站直了, 别趴下 (Stand Up Straight, Don't Bow Down, 1992), directed by Huang Jianxin, and *Shang yi dang* 上一当 (Once Fooled, 1992), directed by He Qun 何群.³⁸⁵

All these films use 'tiaokan' language, including humorous chatting, ironic comments about the characters themselves and about intellectuals, and exposure of the unreasonable aspects of life. Society provided the conditions for the large number of 'tiaokan' films made. The critic Wang Zhimin commented:

'We are now living in a time when more and more opinions from the past are being exposed as unreasonable. This is the social foundation of 'tiaokan' films. We have got used to living according to a value system which has already become hypocritical. This has caused our psychological

³⁸⁴ Wang Zhimin 王志姜, 'Tiaokan dianying de shenmei tezheng' 调乐电影的日美特征 (The Aesthetic Characteristics of 'Tiaokan' Films), *Dianying chuangzuo* 电影创作 (Cinematic Creation), 1995, vol.5, pp.58-62

³⁸⁵ *ibid.*

characteristic of 'knowing clearly that something is false but wishing to hear the details'.³⁸⁶

People's complaints about various problems in life could not be dealt with through formal official channels, so satirical films with the atmosphere of light comedy were chosen by the film world to show empathy.

Mutual Influences between Literature and Films

Wang Shuo is an obvious example of the mutual influence between literature and film. He has acquired his fame and fortune mainly through film-making. He said:

'When all is said and done, writing for films and TV serials brought me much more fame and profit than writing stories. If I had not turned to film making and TV serials at the right time, then it is 80 or 90 percent certain that I would still be groping my way in the dark, I could write until I was spitting blood and nobody would know.'³⁸⁷

Wang treats his films and TV serials as advertisements for himself: he met two or three hundred reporters in 1992,³⁸⁸ and took the opportunity to say what he liked, talking big and joking, and this was very effective. More and more people came to know his name and his stories, and as a direct result, each of his books sold over 100,000 copies.³⁸⁹ Because of his controversial status many critics wrote articles about him, and several books of popular-style criticism were published at that time.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁶ *ibid.*

³⁸⁷ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.65 (洪佩影视创作为我带来了远超出小说创作的名声和收视。如果我没有抗时地转入影视创作,十有八九我至今还在黑夜里摸索。写隐了形不为人所知)

³⁸⁸ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.18

³⁸⁹ *ibid.*

³⁹⁰ Such as Gao Bo 高波 (ed.), *Wang Shuo, dashi haishi pizi* 王朔, 大师还是痞子 (Wang Shuo, Master or Hooligan), Xiao Sheng 晓声, *Wo shi liumang wo pa shui* 我是流氓我怕谁 (I Am Hooligan, Who Am I Afraid of?).

Chinese films cannot be separated from Chinese literature; this has been particularly the case since the beginning of the New Era period. Film has followed literature in breaking into areas one after another, for example 'Scar Literature', 'Introspection Literature'. The work of literary creation has led the field, ahead of other artistic forms, because it allows for more independent thinking, more freedom of expression and lower financial costs. Film directors are very conscious of their debt to literature. This is especially the case for Zhang Yimou and his successful films. He has emphasised the significance of Chinese literature for films:

'If we do research into contemporary Chinese film, first we should do research into contemporary Chinese literature. Because Chinese film has never left literature—its 'walking stick'. When determining whether Chinese film is prosperous or not, first we should observe whether Chinese literature is prosperous or not. If China has good films, then we should first thank the writers' good stories that made possible the creation of these films. If you took away these stories, the majority of Chinese films would not exist.'³⁹¹

The success of Zhang Yimou's films has in turn led to the success of these writers' works. The relationship is a symbiotic one. Once a writer's stories are adapted for film, then the writer will benefit in terms of both money and fame. For example stories of both Mo Yan 莫言 and Su Tong 苏童 have been adapted into films by Zhang Yimou. As a result, Mo Yan and Su Tong have enjoyed greater national and international fame since then.

The influence of film on Wang Shuo cannot be overestimated. Many of his stories came out of plans or designs for films and TV serials, such as *Nobody Cheers*, *I Am Your Dad* and *Please Don't Call Me Human*.³⁹² The clear scene descriptions of the

³⁹¹ Chen Mo 陈语, 'Xinshiqi Zhongguo dianying yu wenxue' 新时期中国电影与文学 (New Era Chinese Film and Literature), *Dangdai dianying* 当代电影 (Contemporary Film), 1995, vol.2, pp.44-51

³⁹² Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, pp.53-54

stories show that he was already considering how directors would make them into films.

The Chinese film industry is lacking in popular storywriters for making entertainment films. Chinese writers look down on popular literary works and do not want to write for entertainment films because of their stubbornness and aloof attitude. On the other hand, they cannot really write good and purely popular stories because of their serious literary principles. In the 1980s there was only Wang Shuo who was willing and able to write popular contemporary stories,³⁹³ but the film world demand exceeds the supply of the literary world, and Wang Shuo cannot do everything.

As a result of commercial developments and the requirements of the film industry, there was anxiety that literature and writers would become the servants of filmmakers. An extraordinary example of this was when Zhang Yimou who, on the basis of his reputation as a maker of art films and his international fame, arranged for five well known writers to write five versions of an historical story about the only empress in Chinese history, Wu Zetian 武则天 (624-705), at the same time, so that he could choose the most suitable one to make into a film or TV serials;³⁹⁴ they included Su Tong and Zhao Mei 赵玫. This caused such a scandal in the cultural field that the film plan was dropped in the end.

³⁹³ Chen Mo 陈语, 'New Era Chinese Film and Literature', *Contemporary Film*, pp.44-51

³⁹⁴ *ibid.*

Wang Shuo's Stories Inspire Film Directors

Many film directors have been closely associated with Wang Shuo, and all the films of Wang's work have been made by directors aged in their late 20s and early 30s. Most of them are fifth and sixth generation film directors, such as Xia Gang 夏刚, Ye Daying 叶大鹰 and Zhang Yuan 张元. It is true that the film is the production of the director, and not the film editor nor the original writer of the story. However, in Wang Shuo's case, so many of his stories have been made into films, that they are referred to as Wang Shuo's films, rather than as the director's films.

These film directors are influential figures in the cultural field in China, similar in status to film directors in America; they are emerging along with Wang Shuo as a very powerful influential group in the contemporary cultural market. They have the same kind of value and tastes. Wang Shuo is obviously at the heart of the 'Wang Shuo group'.³⁹⁵ He is the person who retains his independence of thought, and who dares to express his controversial views publicly, even when these views are different from those of the majority of people or when they go against the authorities or fashion.

Another example, Wang's story *Wild Animal* inspired Jiang Wen 姜文, who is a well known actor-turned-film director, to make his first film *Yangguang canlan de rizi* 阳光灿烂的日子 (In the Heat of the Sun, 1995). The development of Wang's influence over a new film director is recorded in Jiang's book on the process of making the film:

³⁹⁵ Dai Jinhua, *Scenes in the Fog*, p.479. For example, the 'Sea Horse Film and TV Centre' 海马影视创作中心.

‘Wang Shuo and I have had the same kind of experiences, we were both army barracks children, and both had a lot of contact with local children. After reading this story, I felt my heart leap. Wang Shuo’s story was like an injection into my skin, blood came out with a ‘peep’.’³⁹⁶

Wild Animal is a story which incorporates many of Wang Shuo’s personal feelings and memories of his youth. When Jiang asked Wang to be the editor of his film, Wang refused. This was said by Wang to be because he had suffered many distressing experiences being an editor for a director who had very strong views of his own.³⁹⁷ Wang thought that Jiang should write the film script himself, then the director would be clear what he wanted to shoot rather than cause the script editor grief, and “lift himself up on the corpse of the editor”.³⁹⁸ Jiang really wrote the film script himself.

When Jiang wrote the script, he felt:

‘Family, school, relations between boys and boys, relations between boys and girls of that time were all things I felt, so I wrote them into the script. As though Wang Shuo’s story was a guideline or the point of an explosion, it exploded things buried in my heart, and every time I read the story and wrote the script, I was always looking for explosion points, looking for them to explode something from the rubble. Wang Shuo’s story has this kind of power, has this kind of explosive power, this is very important for me. After the explosions, I am not clear how many ideas belonged to the story and how many belong to me, but I know, the spirit is still there, because Wang Shuo’s story enabled me clearly to touch the vein.’³⁹⁹

Although the film was still based on Wang’s story, Jiang made it into his personal film to describe the most unforgettable experiences of his own youth, as exciting as a rock concert.⁴⁰⁰ The film combined both Wang and Jiang’s experiences and the

³⁹⁶ Jiang Wen etc., *Dansheng* 法生 (The Birth), Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1997, p.4

³⁹⁷ Jiang Wen etc., *The Birth*, p.126

³⁹⁸ *ibid.*, pp.126-127

³⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p.6

⁴⁰⁰ Jiang Wen, ‘The World Through the Eyes of Jiang Wen’, *Chinese Literature*, Autumn 1993, pp.164-172

growing up process from boy to man typical of their generation. It has a very strong atmosphere of nostalgia and retrospection.

The film brought alive many people's memories of the Cultural Revolution: the clothes people wore, especially those of teenage boys, all military green; the Soviet song 'Night in the Moscow Suburbs' 莫斯科郊外的晚上; the Soviet film 'Lenin in 1918'; a teacher losing control in a classroom; adolescent infatuation. Wang Shuo, as a supporting actor, acted Xiao Huaidan 小坏蛋 (Little Bastard) in the film.

Jiang did not try to make a pure art film, he made it into a commercial film. When he was looking for investors, some people asked him why he wanted to make a Wang Shuo film, since they thought that Wang Shuo films were already out of date. Jiang did not agree with them. The film was shown in public and achieved the box office record for 1995.

Some film directors made several Wang Shuo films, such as Xia Gang, who made *Half Seawater and Half Fire* and *Nobody Cheers*, and a film imitating Wang Shuo's style called *Relax Control*. Of all the film directors Wang Shuo has worked with, Feng Xiaogang has been his closest and longest term partner.⁴⁰¹ Feng Xiaogang is the main figure in the 'Wang Shuo group',⁴⁰² and Feng is currently the most successful

⁴⁰¹ Feng Xiaogang worked in the Beijing Army Performance Group as an art designer and then worked in the Beijing TV Art Centre as a painter. He worked as a painter for several TV serials, including *Bianyi jingcha* 贤亮灵与 (Plainclothes Policeman). When Feng began editing films, he cooperated with Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙 and wrote his first film script for *Zaoyu jiqing* 肉遇激情 (Encountering Feeling) which was directed by Xia Gang 夏刚. He won best editor at the Chinese Film Golden Chicken Awards. Later he became a TV serial and film director.

⁴⁰² Dai Jinhua, *Scenes in the Fog*, p. 478

commercial film director in China because of the 'new year films' 贺岁片⁴⁰³ that he has been making since 1997.

Feng Xiaogang has often publicly acknowledged Wang Shuo as his teacher, and insists that he has always been Wang's student:

'It is as a result of reading Wang Shuo's stories that I have the creative impulse. I should say that he has inspired my imagination. People of our generation have a very strong feeling of affinity with his works; his works have a very strong sense of intimacy. Therefore the films we make today also have these characteristics.'⁴⁰⁴

Feng was stimulated by Wang's stories, felt very close to the characters in these stories, and was fascinated by Wang Shuo's use of language:

'The field of vision which goes forward with time and the angle of observing life had a great influence on my later career as a director, and they became programmatic documents which guided me to make the new year films.'⁴⁰⁵

Feng and Wang were co-editors of the TV serial *Stories of the Editorial Office* 编辑部的故事 (1992). Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙 suggested that Feng write in Wang's language style, and people were almost unable to tell which was which. The TV serial was a great success.⁴⁰⁶

Wang and Feng set up the Good Dream Film and TV Planning Company 好梦影视策划公司 in 1993, in which Wang was the director and Feng was the manager. Wang had managed to find some finance in 1993. It was he who first caused Feng Xiaogang

⁴⁰³ Zheng Xiaolong picked up the idea of special new year editions of soap operas from America, Feng Xiaogang developed this into new year films, specials to attract the holiday crowds.

⁴⁰⁴ Du Jianfeng 彦周峰, 'Cong Wang Shuo dao Feng Xiaogang' 从王朔到冯小刚 (From Wang Shuo to Feng Xiaogang), *Beijing lianhe daxue xuebao* 北京联合大学学报 (Journal of Beijing United University), vol.16, No.4, Dec. 2002, pp.20-24

⁴⁰⁵ Feng Xiaogang, *Wo ba qingchun xian gei ni* 我把青春献给你 (I Offer My Youth To You), p.44

⁴⁰⁶ See Chapter 3.2: Wang Shuo and TV Drama Serials.

to become a film director, when Feng filmed Wang's love story *Losing My Love For Ever* in 1993. Their company made Liu Zhenyun's story *Yi di ji mao* 一地鸡毛 (A Land Covered in Chicken Feathers) into a TV serial in 1994, and also produced another two TV serials *Qing Shang* 情殇 (The Trauma) and *Yueliang beimian* 月亮背面 (The Back of the Moon) in 1995 which were not permitted to be broadcast in the Beijing area.⁴⁰⁷

When Wang Shuo directed his first film, *Dad*, in 1996, Feng Xiaogang was the main actor. After their second film was banned, Wang decided to split with Feng and leave the world of films and TV serials, so that Feng Xiaogang would still have the chance to develop on his own.⁴⁰⁸

Their company was closed down. Censorship of the media, including film, TV and radio broadcasting is particularly strict when there is a political propaganda campaign going on, and if films express the director's real thoughts and feelings and these conflict with mainstream ideology, the government will ban them no matter what the cost. There is no possibility of negotiation with the authorities. Film-makers suffer not only financially but also psychologically. Film directors have to think through carefully political or social themes in order to pass official censorship. When making pure entertainment and commercial films there are generally no problems in passing censorship. This was the only choice for Feng Xiaogang, and it has also been the only choice for many other film directors.

⁴⁰⁷ Dai Jinhua, *Scenes in the Fog*, p.479

⁴⁰⁸ Feng Xiaogang, *I Offer My Youth To You*, p.91

When Feng was recalling his experiences of making films and TV serials in his book *I Offer My Youth to You*, his editor suggested that he write more about the films and TV serials he had made than about Wang Shuo. Feng replied:

‘I found that in all the beautiful battles I won, every one had countless connections with Wang Shuo.’⁴⁰⁹

In 1997, Feng was the first film director to make New Year films, items which were specially produced and released for the period of the New Year and Chinese Spring Festival. The first film *Jiafang yifang* 甲方乙方 (Party A Party B), was a light comedy adapted from Wang Shuo’s story *You Are Not An Ordinary Man*. He did not dare to attach Wang’s name to it, a ploy to which Wang agreed.⁴¹⁰ The box office receipts for *Party A Party B* were 30 million yuan, an excellent result for a Chinese film in 1998.

Party A Party B, in 1998 was almost a sequel to Wang Shuo’s film *The Operators* made ten years earlier. The ‘Three T’ company in *The Operators* and the ‘Good Dream’ company in *Party A Party B* both provide surreal services for ordinary people, either using ridiculous methods of comforting people or allowing them to fulfil their dreams. The services they provide for people are described case by case in the two films, which both use the same narrative method and structure. The actor Ge You 葛尤 plays the lead in most of Feng’s new year films, and Zhang Guoli 张国立 acts in one of them. Both of them were main actors in *The Operators* (1988).

Feng continued to refine this type of film, but the language style remained typical Wang Shuo. Feng made the 2001 film *Yi sheng tanxi* 一声叹息 (A Sigh) which Wang

⁴⁰⁹ Feng Xiaogang, *I Offer My Youth To You*, p.124

⁴¹⁰ *ibid* p.105

Shuo edited. The script had originally been intended for the banned film *Living an Awkward Life*, which had been revised many times in an attempt to compromise with the authorities, so that in the end it resembled a propaganda film about preserving family stability. Wang Shuo, as the editor, criticised the film for being as shallow as any other film.⁴¹¹

Feng's success is a unique achievement in the depressed Chinese film industry. Feng is welcomed more than famous film directors such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yuan, and occupies the leading position in the commercial film industry. Feng Xiaogang's films use the format of employing film stars who are attractive to an audience, such as Ge You. The films are light and witty, suiting mass taste. The characteristics of these films are that they are even more market- and consumer-oriented, with more comedy and a more popularised style. They are referred to as 'post-Wang Shuo films'.⁴¹²

As a result of the success of Feng's light comedy films, more and more people have come to think that making people laugh is a basic principle of mass culture. Feng's method is to use humorous dialogues in his films to make the audience laugh. He admits that he learnt the style of his dialogues from Wang Shuo:

'One method of humour I often use is actually one I learnt from Wang Shuo, but as I have grasped the essentials of this kind of ironic language environment, I can keep creating and elaborating on it.'⁴¹³

⁴¹¹ 'Bianju Wang Shuo tan 'Yisheng tanxi' shan ziji zuiba' 编剧王朔谈 <一声诉府> 自 己达救 (Editor Wang Shuo Talks About 'A Sigh' Slapping Itself in the Mouth), *Meiri xin bao* 每日新报 (New Daily), 25/09/2000, quoted from 人民网, www.people.com.cn/GB/channel16/33/20000925/249392.html

⁴¹² Ni Zhen 倪震, 'Shouwang xinshengdai' 炫望新生代 (Keep Watch on the New Generation), *Dianying yishu* 电影艺术 (Film Art), 1999, vol. 4, pp.70-73

⁴¹³ Chen Li 陈被, 'Youxi shengcun--Feng Xiaogang hesuipian de xijü tese ji wenhua tezheng' 游戏.生存--冯小刚贺岁话的喜剧特色及文化特征' (Playing the Game and Surviving--Comedy and Cultural

However, no matter how great Feng's achievement, he is still living in the shadow of Wang Shuo, as Feng himself points out:

'Indeed, my work started by imitating Wang Shuo, but somewhere in the middle, it changed its slant, and became work that wore the coat of Wang Shuo's style. In fact, my films were gentler than Wang Shuo's, the things inside his bones are very severe.I am very fond of Wang Shuo's stories, I feel they are lively, that the circumstances he describes are right before my eyes, and it's as though the characters are standing in front of me. I have always emphasised that I should not walk in other people's shadows, but in fact, I am still in Wang Shuo's shadow. Wang Shuo's works are very sharp and powerful; he can make gags, is quick-witted and wise.'⁴¹⁴

Wang Shuo's characteristic 'tiaokan' language is used in Feng's films, although compared with the language of Wang's stories, they are less deconstructive, and the characters have less of a rebellious and critical spirit. Feng tries to retain Wang's critical spirit, but he has to compromise with the authorities and the audience, and reduce the sharpness of the criticism in Wang Shuo's literary works.

It is surprising to see what a great influence Wang Shuo has had on Feng Xiaogang, and through him on the development of Chinese film, especially in terms of the process and direction of commercial films. Although Wang Shuo is not in the front line, he is definitely the original essential source and one of the most influential figures behind the scenes of the film industry.

Characteristics in Feng Xiaogang's New Year Films), *Dianying yishu* 电影艺术 (Film Art); 2001, vol. 1, pp.88-91

⁴¹⁴ Yu Xueshi 情遗忘, 'Feng Xiaogang: Zhongguo dianying daoyan zhong de 'ling lei'' 冯小刚: 中国电影导演中的 '另类' (Feng Xiaogang: An 'Odd-ball' Among Chinese Film Directors), *Yishujia* 艺术家 (Artist), 2001, vol.2, pp.4-9

Wang Shuo as Film Director

A film editor has to listen to the director when writing and revising the film script. A film is the work of the director, and reflects the director's thoughts, not the editor's or the writer's. Wang Anyi wrote of her experiences editing Chen Kaige's film *Feng yue* 风月 (Temptress Moon):

'Sometimes I would argue about something with Chen Kaige, and when the argument grew fierce, he would say: this is my thing! I would choke off, speechless; however I had to admit that what he said was right. On one occasion, he had probably drunk a little alcohol and so he was in a good mood, and said: I want this film to be full of your sentimentalism. The words made me feel that he wanted to give me a gift, but I was definitely not about to think that it was my thing.'⁴¹⁵

This reflects the conflict between the scriptwriter and the director: the writer has to write what the director wants, rather than what he or she wants. Wang Shuo had similar experiences; he would rather express his own thoughts directly to an audience. Wang directed the film 'Dad' 爸爸, which was adapted from his story 'I am Your Dad', and which was banned by the authorities in 1996 because of its grey style.

Dad was 'smuggled' to the 53rd Locarno International Film Festival in 2000 and won the Golden Leopard Award. The Ecumenical Jury praised the film:

'.....for its universal dimensions using the father-son relationship as a metaphor for that of the individual faced with political and social authorities. The quest for individual rights and liberty hurts a father, who is an image of institutions claiming to know what is good for each of us. Access to full individual adulthood comes through the sacrifice of the father in substituting himself as a victim. The jury especially appreciated the use of music and humour.'⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Wang Anyi-王安忆, 'Chen Kaige yu "Fengyue"' 陈凯歌与《风月》, (Chen Kaige and 'Temptress Moon'), *Piaobo de yuyan* 当泊的语言 (Wandering Language), Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 1996, pp.66-77

⁴¹⁶ Ecumenical Jury of 53rd Locarno International Film Festival, International Catholic Organization for Cinema and Audiovisual, quoted from <http://www.ocic.org/general/LocarnoANGlweb.htm>

The Locarno International Film Festival hoped to distribute the film all over the world, as they hold the only copy available outside China,⁴¹⁷ although both the film critic Dai Jinhua and Wang Shuo himself think the film is not perfect in many ways.⁴¹⁸

Wang Shuo was in the process of trying to make his second film *Guozhe langbeibukan de shenghuo* 过着狼狈不堪的生活 (Living an Awkward Life, 1996), when he was ordered to stop after 10 days' shooting. His films were the victims of a new round of government battles to stop 'bourgeois spiritual pollution' 资产阶级精神污染. Wang was the main target of this movement, a fact he found really frustrating. Films suffer much more serious censorship because they are visual, and appeal to a much wider audience than books. Wang escaped to America for six months.

Commercialisation has its negative effects, one of these being that many film makers only want to make a profit, rather than to produce high quality cultural products. Many vulgar and badly made films and TV programmes flooded the market. Audiences were attracted by Western products because most of them were of good quality, since they had been carefully selected by the authorities. This led to a false veneration of Western films and TV serials. Film and TV makers should improve

⁴¹⁷ The 53rd Locarno International Film Festival, http://www.filmfestivals.com/locarno_2000/jury_awards.htm

⁴¹⁸ Interview with Dai Jinhua in October 2002, and telephone interview with Wang Shuo 19/07/2003. The film is not available in China and cannot be obtained from the film market or even from the Locarno International Film Festival.

their own knowledge, skills and quality as well as the quality of their products. As writer Liu Zhenyun says:

‘The film and TV world have the problem of improving their own educational quality, if there is no education then there is no knowledge, and the biggest reflection of ‘no knowledge’ is the particularly intense consciousness of ‘colonial culture’ deep inside everybody. It is very important what foreigners say, it is quite important what others say, and it is much less important what they themselves say. And I think that audiences as a group have already become used to this formula, and cannot get used to creating anything for themselves, which is basically caused by a national weakness.’⁴¹⁹

The poor quality of films and TV serials made many people think that they could do better. Commercialisation meant that people who were not graduates of the film institutes were able to make films. The fifth and sixth generation film directors were almost all graduates of the film institutes, and were the only people allowed to be a part of the old film administration system and work for film studios. The commercialised market has changed all this, and now anyone who can obtain the necessary funding can become a film director.

Wang Shuo was the first writer to become a film director in China. Following in Wang’s footsteps, several writers then became film or TV serials directors. The writer Liu Heng 刘恒 was the director responsible for turning Ling Li’s 凌力 story *Shaonian Tianzi* 少年天子 (The Young Emperor) into a TV serial.⁴²⁰ Liu Heng talked about the fascinating aspects of being a director:

⁴¹⁹ Liu Zhenyun 刘震云 & Wang Li 王莉, ‘Dui Zhongguo yingshi wenhua de yi zhong kanfa’ 对中国影视文化的一种看法 (A View of Chinese Film and TV Culture), *Dianying yishu* 电影艺术 (Film Art), 2001, vol. 2, pp. 79-82.

⁴²⁰ Liu Heng 刘恒 is famous for his story ‘Fuxi fuxi’ 怕更怕更 (Fuxi Fuxi). This story was adapted into the film *Judou* by film director Zhang Yimou 张艺谋. His stories include ‘Bai wo’ 白驹 (White Whirlpool) and ‘Pinzui Zhang Damin de xingfu shenghuo’ 张大民的蹉跎生活 (Garrulous Zhang Damin’s Happy Life).

‘Writers work very hard writing stories, but there may be only ten people who read them, while directors simply make a sound and there may be more than ten thousand people in the audience.’⁴²¹

As directors, their thoughts and views about society and life can reach a massive audience, so they feel that their efforts are much more appreciated. Writers usually have a certain insight into society and life, avoiding shallow or meaningless plots, and they have advantages in script-writing, using the skill of story telling to arrange the plot, to shift scenes and change the pace in films and TV serials. It is not too difficult to learn film language in order to reach a certain standard, and they can employ good quality cameramen and other professional staff.

There are quite a few people outside the film world who have become film directors, such as the painter Chen Yifei 陈逸飞, the comedian Huang Hong 黄宏, and the musicians Gao Xiaosong 高晓松 and Li Chunbo 李春波.⁴²² They all have their different artistic qualities and ambitions, and can bring their own speciality into their films. The fact that people from different artistic fields have entered the film industry has helped to stimulate the film world, challenged the film directors who have come through the formal system, and made the film industry more and more competitive. It

⁴²¹ Liu Jianghua 刘干华, ‘Liu Heng jiangshu dang daoyan de xingfu shenghuo’ 刘恒讲述当导演的蹉跎生活 (Liu Heng Talks About the Happy Life of Being A Director), *Beijing qingnianbao* 北京青年报 (Beijing Youth), 27/11/2002, quoted from <http://www.bjyouth.com/article.jsp?oid=1889589>

⁴²² Wen Xin 道心, ‘“Xinren” tiaozhan yingshiquan—er ling ling er nian ‘yeyu daoyan’ paipian saomiao’ ‘新人’挑战影视猛—2002年‘业余导演’病来缺描 (‘New People’ Challenge Film and TV World—Scanning Film Making by Amateur Directors in 2002), *Xinmin wanbao* 新民晚报 (New People’s Evening News), 19/12/2002, p.9. Chen Yifei 陈逸飞 made the films *Hai shang jiu meng* 海上文梦 (The Old Dream on the Sea), etc. Huang Hong 黄宏 made the film *Ershiwu ge haizi yi ge die* 十五个孩子一个那 (Twenty Five Children and One Father), Gao Xiaosong 高晓松 made the film *Nashi hua kai* 那时花开 (The Flower Blooming at That Time), Li Chunbo 李春波 made the film *Nühai bie ku* 女孩别哭 (Don’t Cry Girl).

will also help to push forward improvements in the quality of Chinese films and TV serials.

Wang Shuo as Film Critic

The representative sixth generation film director Zhang Yuan made Wang's story 'Guo ba yin jiu si' 过把瘾就死 (Enjoy then Die) into Wang Shuo's latest film *Wo ai ni* 我爱你 (I Love You) in 2002. This was a commercial film which examined issues in the love lives and marriages of young people. Although the film was not a great financial success, Wang Shuo was frequently mentioned in the media, including on the internet, for stimulating the market.

Wang Shuo shows every intention of keeping up his influence in the film industry; he has acted as a film critic, criticising various phenomena in the film world and, for example, Zhang Yimou. Zhang has achieved extraordinary fame in China as a leader in the cultural field. His films declined in the 1990s, however; the films *Yi ge dou bu neng shao* 一个都不能少 (Not One Less, 1999), *Wo de fuqin muqin* 我的父亲母亲 (The Road Home, 1999) and *Xingfu shiguang* 幸福时光 (Happy Days, 2000) were almost 'mainstream' 主旋律 propaganda type films, which disappointed audiences, although they were more willingly accepted by the authorities.

Wang Shuo described an extraordinary situation, in which at least three reporters, who had written articles criticising Zhang Yimou, told him that they had received 'pestering' telephone calls from Zhang Yimou's 'literary planning' person, Wang Bin.

He talked to them for hours, discussing their criticisms and trying to persuade them.

Wang Shuo commented:

‘There is one person, where the things he has produced have deteriorated, and yet the voices raised to protect him are even louder. Originally, these works were not above criticism, however, now they are praised by everybody, and it is difficult not to suspect that there is a power behind him, with somebody operating the controls.’⁴²³

Wang Shuo felt sick and angry about this, and he condemned Zhang Yimou and his group’s behaviour. In Wang’s opinion, people should not mount personal attacks on literary critics.⁴²⁴

According to Wang Shuo, Zhang Yimou always wanted success in all aspects of his work, including in the commercial market, in winning international art film awards, and in keeping the authorities happy in order to pass censorship. Zhang Yimou was an art film director; however people had been unable to see any artistic merit in his recent films,⁴²⁵ which have been ‘dominated by a kind of strong subjective intention, of wanting to fawn on everybody.’⁴²⁶

Wang Shuo criticised Zhang Yimou’s artistic deterioration, ‘cheap cheerfulness’ and ‘painting a false picture of peace and prosperity’.⁴²⁷ Wang Shuo’s criticisms are always loud. An art film should not just be a combination of official ideology and a made-up story with wonderful pictures. The makers of the declining art film are still looking for a niche to survive in, between official ideology and the commercial

⁴²³ Wang Shuo 王朔, ‘Cong yi ge liuyan shuo qi’ 从一个流言说起 (Speaking from a Rumour), *Sanlian shenghuo zhouban* 三联生活周刊 (Sanlian Life Weekly), 2000, vol. 5, p.64

⁴²⁴ *ibid.*

⁴²⁵ Wang Shuo 王朔 and Wang Tong 王彤, ‘Wang Shuo zai xian’ 王朔在线 (Wang Shuo Online) *Xiaoshuo jie* 小说界 (Story World), 2001, vol. 2, pp.135-150 (我全看不到他有任何艺术追求)

⁴²⁶ Wang Shuo 王朔, ‘Speaking from a Rumour’, *Sanlian Life Weekly*, 2000, vol. 5, p.64

⁴²⁷ Wang Shuo 王朔 and Wang Tong 王彤, ‘Wang Shuo Online’, *Fiction World*, 2001, vol.2, pp.135-150

market. Zhang Yimou changed his focus completely, and began making pure entertainment and commercial films. He made a martial arts film called *Yingxiong* 英雄 (Hero), released at the end of 2002. The film contains wonderful moving images but not very much else. Most art film directors have turned to making commercial films; for instance, Chen Kaige made *He ni zai yiqi* 和你在一起 (To Be with You) in 2001. The fact that art film directors have joined in making commercial films may provide some hope for improving the quality of Chinese commercial films.

Film directors have a very strong instinct for survival, and it is unfortunate that the cost of living for film directors is very high. Wang Shuo can give up film making and become a writer again, but other film-makers cannot. Wang sympathises with film directors:

‘To those film directors who make pandering films, I say, from the most sympathetic angle, that they are forced to by life.’⁴²⁸

In the face of severe censorship, film directors find it very difficult to maintain their own standpoint, their own taste and their own aesthetics. If a film does not get past the censor or if it is unsuccessful in the market, the huge financial loss will make it hard for them to obtain investment for their next film. Chinese film directors have to chase box office results and face the challenge of Hollywood at the same time. In the mid-1990s, there were ten big international films imported into China each year; following China’s entry into the WTO (World Trade Organisation), roughly forty foreign films are being imported each year, mainly from Hollywood, and this quota will greatly increase later on. Chinese film makers have to ensure that the quality of their films is good enough to compete with Hollywood films, including the artistic, technological,

⁴²⁸ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.128

and entertainment aspects. This indicates a tough battle for survival for the national film industry.

II. Wang Shuo and Popular TV Serials

Wang Shuo's national fame dates from his work on the earliest home-produced soap operas. He took part in making two TV serials *Yearning* and *Stories of the Editorial Office*. The national impact of these was enormous. Once again it was his commercial instincts and feel for the popular market that distinguished Wang Shuo.

The History of TV Serials Production in China

In 1958, China set up its first television station in Beijing and started to test the broadcasting of TV programmes. At that time, there were only 50 television sets in the country, and by 1978, there were still fewer than 10,000 television sets in the whole of China.⁴²⁹ The first Chinese TV serials was called *Yi kou caibingzi* 一口菜饼子 (A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake), broadcast in Beijing in 1958. At that time, television programmes had little influence in China since television was a relatively new phenomenon. In the ten years from 1966 to 1976, China stopped making TV serials altogether, while television technology was developing at a great rate in Western countries. From 1980 onwards, there were rapid developments in TV serial making in China, with more than 100 serials being produced in 1980 alone. In September 1982, the first TV serials studio—the Beijing Television Studio—was set

⁴²⁹ Hu Zhifeng >, 'Zhongguo dianshi guannian yange zonglan' 中国电视观念沿革总论 (Review of the Evolution of Chinese Television Concepts), *Xiandai chuanbo—Beijing Guangbo Xueyuan xuebao* 现代传客—北京广健学院学报 (Modern Media—Journal of the Beijing Broadcasting Institution), 1999, vol. 4. See also Hu Zhifeng's research paper for the International Conference on 'Meijie yu bentu wenhua shengchan' 苦泄与本是文化生明 (Media and Local Cultural Production) held at Beijing University on 13-15 December 1999.

up.⁴³⁰ During this period, the popularity of television dramatically increased. People living in the cities rushed to buy black and white sets. Many TV programmes and serials were of poor quality and the themes were uninteresting. Discussions were organised about how to improve the quality of TV serials, and how to put an end to poor quality products. Around 1984, the Chinese government set up a new government department—the Broadcasting and Television Department.⁴³¹ As a result of economic developments and the open door policy, television sets became important household appliances, and many foreign TV serials were imported, such as the Japanese serial *Zisan silang* 姿三四郎 (Sugata Sanshiroo) and the Hong Kong serial *Huo Yuanjia* 霍元甲, which were both very popular in the 1980s. From the Brazilian serials *Feibang* 诽谤 (Slander) and *Nü nu* 女奴 (Girl Slave), people came to realise that ‘indoor dramas’ 室内剧 (shineiju) were already very common in other countries. This was because of the many advantages of making them, such as low cost, fast production process and the fact that they are close reflections of real life. By 1989, there were 140 million TV sets in China and the audience total had reached 700 million.⁴³² This was the first time that television programmes could be delivered to the majority of the population, including almost the entire urban population, and watching television in the evening become a part of ordinary people’s daily lives. In the same year, the Beijing Television Art Centre started making the first ‘indoor drama’, *Yearning*, which was broadcast in 1990, when TV audiences in China had risen to

⁴³⁰ Beijing dianshi zhipian chang 北京电视制片厂. Now called Beijing dianshi yishu zhongxin 北京电视艺术中心 (Beijing Television Art Centre) Peng Jixiang 汗药象, *Yingshi jianshang* 影视老霞 (Appreciation of Film and Television), p.214

⁴³¹ Guangbo dianshi bu 广健电视部. Film was dealt with by the Cultural Department; now the department is called 广健电影电视部 (The Broadcasting, Film and Television Department). Hu Zhifeng, ‘Review of the Evolution of Chinese Television Concepts’, research paper for International Conference on Media and Local Cultural Production.

⁴³² Jia Leilei 贾磊磊, ‘Zhongguo dianshiju de lishi yu xianzhuang’ 中国电视剧的者史与现状 (The History and Current Situation of Chinese Television Serials), *Wenyi yanjiu* 文艺中峰 (Research on Literature and Art), 2001, vol. 6, pp.28-38

79.4% of the population.⁴³³ *Yearning* was the most influential serial nationally in Chinese television history up to that point. After that, in the 1990s, the number of TV serials produced increased dramatically.

Television Development in China⁴³⁴

| Year | TV serials | TV sets | TV audience |
|------|------------|-------------|--------------|
| 1958 | | 50 | |
| 1978 | | 10,000 | |
| 1985 | 1,300 | 50 million | 200 million |
| 1989 | 2,000 | 140 million | 700 million |
| 1991 | 5,000 | 160 million | 800 million |
| 2000 | 7535 | | 1200 million |

In 1991, 5000 TV serials were produced; in 1997, nearly 10,000 serials were produced. However, in 2000, this number dropped to 7535, after a number of poor quality TV serials made a financial loss, and people become more cautious about TV serial making. By that time the audience total had risen to 1.2 billion.⁴³⁵ Television can now reach audiences much greater than any other medium, including films, newspapers and radio, and is able to reach virtually the whole population in China. At the same time it has become the most powerful tool of mass communication, and one

⁴³³ Zhongguo baixing lanpishu' 中国百姓蓝皮书 (The Chinese Common People's Blue Paper), Chapter: Wenhua 文化 (Culture). *Beijing qingnianbao* 北京青年报 (Beijing Youth), 26 Aug. 2002, quoted from Renmin wang 人民网 (People's Net) www.people.com.cn

⁴³⁴ Hu Zhifeng, 'Review of the Evolution of Chinese Television Concepts', research paper for International Conference on Media and Local Cultural Production; Jia Leilei 贾磊磊, The 'History and Current Situation of Chinese Television Serials', *Research on Literature and Art*, 2001, vol. 6, pp.28-38

⁴³⁵ Jia Leilei 贾磊磊, The 'History and Current Situation of Chinese Television Serials', *Research on Literature and Art*, 2001, vol. 6, pp.28-38

of the biggest business markets, for example, in terms of advertising. Therefore, TV programmes, especially TV serials, have developed from just satisfying the political censors to concern with two other powerful forces: commercial interests and mass preferences. *Yearning* marked the turning point in this television development in China.

Yearning

After the success of the Brazilian indoor drama, the Beijing Television Art Centre decided to make a long indoor drama based on the lives of Chinese people and made by Chinese artists. In 1988, a big new studio was set up near Fragrant Mountain 香山 in Beijing, and it was hoped that it would be used daily to ensure it was profitable. Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙⁴³⁶ and Li Xiaoming 李晓明⁴³⁷, who worked for the Beijing TV Art Centre, wanted to make an indoor drama serials with 50 episodes. In order to keep costs low, they were planning to use several cameras to record different scenes at the same time. Since they thought there was no story suitable for making into such a long TV serials immediately, the core of the story was to be based on a newspaper report of a few hundred words. In 1989, they looked to writers for help, and Wang Shuo, Zheng Wanlong 郑万隆 and Chen Changben 陈常本 agreed to participate in writing the scripts.

⁴³⁶ Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙 was part of 'Wang Shuo's group', he worked at the Beijing TV station TV Serials Art Centre as an editor, and later became a director. He made Wang Shuo's story *Air Hostess* into a TV serial in 1984, and the response from audiences was good.

⁴³⁷ Li Xiaoming 李晓明, TV serial editor. His main works are *Yearning* and *Yuwang* 欲望 (Desire).

Yearning was first broadcast in the winter of 1990 in Beijing, and then, within less than a year, to more than a hundred TV stations all over China.⁴³⁸ This serial attracted an audience of many millions, who followed the story and became emotionally involved with the dramatic fate of the characters. This extraordinary effect was described as producing 'empty streets' (万人空巷) when it was broadcast in Beijing and in the provinces. People talked about it everywhere—on the buses, in factories and stores—and they became concerned about the frustrations of Liu Huifang 刘慧芳. For many people it became an integral part of their lives.

Yearning was designed to conform to the principles of government propaganda. The theme song broadcast at the beginning of every episode was 'Good People Have A Peaceful Life' 好人一生平安, indicating the traditional moral expectations of people and the requirements of the authorities. The Chinese government was quite happy about it, since after the 1989 massacre the situation was very tense, and the enthusiastic response to *Yearning* in an objective sense helped to alleviate the oppressive atmosphere. *Yearning* was supported by the authorities after it became popular, and for the first time the propaganda and educational value of TV soaps was paid great attention by the purveyors of the official ideology. Politburo member Li Ruihuan 李瑞环, who was in charge of national ideology, met with the *Yearning* crew in the Huarentang at Zhongnanhai 中南海怀仁堂, where the central Chinese government holds its meetings. He congratulated them on the success of the serial and described it as 'a worthy model for our literary and artistic workers.'⁴³⁹ The CCP thus recognised the power of television fiction and determined to harness it to its needs.

⁴³⁸ Tao Dongfeng 米东风, *Research on Aesthetic Culture in the Transitional Society*, p.102

⁴³⁹ Jianying Zha, 'Yearning', *Transition*, Volume 0 (sic), Issue 57 (1992), p.29

A Story that Moved the Nation

The story focuses on relations between the Liu and Wang families. The Liu family is an ordinary working family living in a big mixed courtyard⁴⁴⁰ and the Wang family is an intellectual family living in a modern apartment. During the Cultural Revolution, Liu Huifang, the daughter of the Liu family, married the son of the Wang family, Wang Husheng, despite the fact that the Wang family has been ruined by political problems. Liu Huifang is portrayed as a model of traditional morality: she is kind, hard-working, tolerant - she has all the highest moral virtues - but encounters great misfortune in her life. She only thinks of contributing and making sacrifices. Her ungrateful husband, Wang Husheng, divorces her after the hard times for his family have ended. Liu Huifang takes in and cares for a little girl who has been abandoned, ignoring the opposition of others, but in the end is forced to return her adopted child to the Wang family.⁴⁴¹ Liu Huifang is then crippled after being hit by a car and becomes bedridden.

Liu Huifang is designed to invoke sympathy by representing the a very kind person who meets with the cruellest of fates. Her character provokes many tears and much sympathy on the part of the audience, since she reflects the fate of millions of people who suffered unjustly for many years during the Cultural Revolution. There is a high

⁴⁴⁰ This refers to the original 'siheyuanr' (quadrangle) design: since there were too many people per household, and therefore not enough room for them all, they built poor quality small houses inside the siheyuanr, which made the courtyard crowded and mixed. The mixed courtyard is a typical place for people at the bottom of urban society, who are usually manual labourers without higher or further education. There is only one water tap in the courtyard and people use the public toilets around the local area.

⁴⁴¹ Wang Husheng's 王说生 sister Wang Yaru's 王制商 daughter was left at a train station. By chance she was taken in by Liu Huifang's sister. Liu Huifang adopted her, and nobody knew she was Wang Yaru's daughter. Wang Husheng and Wang Yaru treat the adopted girl badly, and in the end Wang Yaru finds that she is her daughter.

degree of audience identification with her. Critics pointed to the way people enthused over Liu Huifang's virtues and praised her as the 'Goddess of the East' 东方的圣母:

'In all of this we can see people's moral tendencies; we can also see the very powerful emotional pull of the perceived superior morality of the 1950s and 1960s.'⁴⁴²

The commercialisation of every walk of life was becoming more and more intense, but at the same time, it was having a negative influence as well. Relationships between people were becoming colder and more distant, and everything seemed to be connected with money. There were many cases of people cheating each other for money, of not giving credit, even to friends. People began to criticise what they saw as the deterioration in the general character of society. *Yearning* made people yearn for an idealised earlier existence, when people helped each other, loved each other, and were honest and truthful to each other. The Liu family's life in a traditional siheyuanr 四合院 symbolises the good old days of the past.

After 1989, and the destruction of the democracy movement, the people felt extremely disappointed that all their high hopes had been betrayed and a mood of disenchantment set in. It was this mentality that allowed audiences to empathise with Liu Huifang's experiences, a further demonstration that the people at the bottom of Chinese society will put up with any level of suffering, a legacy of the Confucian past.

The story introduced several perennial themes from the traditional aesthetic canon, for example, 'hitting the heartless man' (棒打变心郎). This appeared in the traditional

⁴⁴² Li Zhongyang 李中阳, 'Dianshiju yu daode chongjian' 电视剧与道德重建 (Television Serial and Rebuilding Morality), *Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu* 中国文学中峰 (Research on Chinese Literature), 1998, vol. 1, pp.91-96

story 'Qin Xianglian' 秦香莲.⁴⁴³ It typically involves a beautiful girl who meets a man who is in difficulties; she comforts and helps him, and they get married, but when the man's situation suddenly improves he abandons the woman. This kind of behaviour is particularly frowned upon in traditional morality, and, since it is not uncommon in real life, people relate to this and never get tired of hearing such stories. This was particularly the case after the Cultural Revolution, when there was a wave of divorces. Some involved young educated people who had married peasants when they were sent down to the countryside. Others were the children of intellectual rightists who had married people from the labouring class to give them a more favourable class background, but then chose to get divorced when the political upheavals were over. People like Liu Huifang always win an audience's sympathy, and people like Wang Husheng are always the villains, like Chen Shimei 陈世美, the ungrateful husband in 'Qin Xianglian'.

Another popular theme is 'searching for a lost child' (寻找孤儿), as in the traditional story 'Zhaoshi gu'er' 赵氏孤儿 (The Zhao Family Orphan).⁴⁴⁴ In *Yearning*, Luo Gang left his and Wang Yaru's daughter at a railway station while trying to escape during

⁴⁴³ Qin Xianglian's 8 莲 story, set during the Northern Song Dynasty (北宋 960-1127) is the topic of a well-known Peking opera. Qin Xianglian married Chen Shimei 陈世美 and they had two children. Qin Xianglian took on the burden of all family matters, including looking after the children and Chen's parents, and supported Chen in his studies. Chen went to the capital to take part in the imperial examinations and become a 'zhuangyuan' 状元 (Number One Scholar). When the emperor asked him about his background, Chen lied, saying that his parents were both dead and that he was not married. The emperor let him marry his daughter, and he became a 'fuma' 苏马 (emperor's son-in-law), and lived a life of luxury. After a few years, Chen's parents died, and Qin Xianglian came looking for her husband. Chen refused to acknowledge her and the children, so Qin Xianglian looked for help from the famous upright official Bao Zheng 包拯 (999-1062) to sue Chen, and Chen was finally punished.

⁴⁴⁴ 'Zhaoshi gu'er' 赵州孤儿 (Mr. Zhao's Orphan), a story set in the state of Jin in the Spring and Autumn period (春秋 722-476). It is also the theme of a well-known Peking opera. Three hundred people from Zhao Dun's family were killed by the Jin emperor because of an evil plot by a treacherous court official. And even newly born babies were pursued with the intention of killing them. The Zhao family's guest, Chen Ying 程婴, protects Zhao's orphan and sacrifices his own child. When Zhao's child grows up, he avenges his father.

the Cultural Revolution. Liu Huifang's sister brings the little girl back home, without knowing who she is, and Liu Huifang adopts her. Then Luo Gang and Wang Yaru try in vain to find their daughter. People are so bound up in with their concern for the 'lost and found' child that the story holds the attention of the audience right to the end.

The third theme in this story deals with the vicissitudes of love and marriage, a subject always dear to people's hearts. There are three couples in the story: Liu Huifang and Wang Husheng's is a marriage between a worker and an intellectual; the other marriages are those of the intellectual couple Wang Yaru and Luo Gang, and the worker couple Song Dacheng and Sun Yujuan. None of the three couples has a happy marriage, and they all break up for different reasons. Unlike Liu Huifang's heartless husband, Song Dacheng and Luo Gang are both in love with Liu Huifang, but she refuses to have anything to do with either the worker or the intellectual. Liu Huifang insists on living up to the traditional ethic of loyalty to one man.

Backward Opinions and Prejudice

Members of the Chinese Women's Association have pointed out that Liu Huifang's image set back by 15 years the liberation of Chinese women.⁴⁴⁵ In *Yearning*, the woman is expected to embody traditional moral values, such as benevolence, righteousness and fidelity, and especially 'endurance'. This includes compromising over issues such as self-interest and personal dignity, something that conflicts with the latest values introduced from the West. These Western values emphasise the fact that

⁴⁴⁵ Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *You zai jing zhong* 司在野中 (As if in a Mirror), p.235

everybody has the right to protect his or her interests, and that a woman should not sacrifice herself for a man. The message coming through *Yearning* is a conservative re-affirmation of traditional values; it represents a step backwards, and reflects people's complex feelings towards the value system of modern commercialised society.

The TV serial also demonstrated prejudice against provincial people. The intellectual family is said to have come from Shanghai originally, and the son was born in Shanghai, a fact obvious to the audience because of his name, Husheng 沪生.⁴⁴⁶ The 'badly behaved' people were acted by actors and actresses from Shanghai. This conformed to the prejudices of many people in the North, including Beijing, who think that people from the South are mean, cold and calculating. Conversely Northern people like the Liu family are generous and warm, giving willingly of themselves without expecting anything in return.

The story continues the theme of Wang Shuo's criticism of intellectuals and praise for the working classes. Workers such as Liu Huifang and Song Dacheng are portrayed as honest, loyal and reliable; intellectuals, like Wang Husheng and his sister Wang Yaru, are portrayed as selfish, dishonest and hypocritical. Criticising intellectuals, who are in the minority, is an easy route to popularity when the majority of viewers are from other classes. Whether *Yearning* 'vilified intellectuals' or not became a focal point of argument about the serial, and two groups emerged: the group who wanted to 'protect intellectuals' (保知识分子) and the group who wanted to 'criticise intellectuals' (批

⁴⁴⁶ Hu 沪 is the abbreviation of Shanghai, sheng 生 means to be born.

知识分子). Critics of course tended to criticise the ‘anti-intellectual’ bias, manifested in the suspicion and mockery shown towards intellectuals.⁴⁴⁷

Wang Shuo and the group of writers and directors were not only committed to mainstream ideology but also bowed to the opinions of the majority of ordinary viewers. As one scholar has written: ‘Wang Shuo’s culture is an outstanding example of submitting to ordinary people.’⁴⁴⁸ And some avant-garde writers strongly criticised *Yearning*:

‘In their eyes, everything about *Yearning* was offensive—its official status as a ‘model product’, its crude, derogatory portrayal of intellectuals, its vulgar, melodramatic style, and its celebration, in the service of party politics, of old Chinese values such as self-sacrifice and endurance (versus modern, Western values such as individualism and initiative)’⁴⁴⁹

Yearning was clearly made to cater to people at the lower levels of society, and did not suit the tastes of intellectuals.

The Production Process

Most Chinese TV serials began as adaptations of prominent works of serious literature. Before *Yearning*, TV serials had been based on New Era literature, such as *Cuotuo suiyue* 蹉跎岁月 (Time Passes by and Nothing is Accomplished written by

⁴⁴⁷Wu Di 吴迪, ‘Wenhua toushi: tongsuju de xingsheng yuanyin ji jiazhi quxiang’ ‘文化透视: 通俗剧的兴盛原因及价值取向’ (Cultural Perspective: The Reasons for the Success and Value Orientation of Popular TV Serials), *Dangdai dianying* 当代电影 (Contemporary Cinema), 1994, vol. 6, pp.79-85

⁴⁴⁸ Yang Xiaobin 杨小滨, ‘Jiexi Wang Shuo: yiban shi zilian, yi ban shi shounue’ 解析王朔: 一半是自恋 一半是受虐 (Analysing Wang Shuo: Half Self-love Half Masochism), Xin yu si dianzi wenku 新语丝电子文库 (Xin yusi Electronic Literary Store), www.xys.org/xys/ebooks/literature/novels/Wang-Shuo/jiexi.txt

⁴⁴⁹ Jianying Zha, ‘Yearnings’, *Transition*, Volume 0 (sic), Issue 57 (1992), pp.26-51

Ye Xin 叶辛), based on a 'Scar Literature' work, *Xin xing* 新星 (New Star written by Ke Yunlu 柯云路). Some of the TV serials were made from ancient and modern literary classics, such as *Xi you ji* 西游记 (The Journey to the West) and *Si shi tong tang* 四世同堂 (Four Generation Family).⁴⁵⁰

Yearning was the first really influential mass cultural product. As a long TV serial, *Yearning* departed from the custom of relying on literary works. The aim behind the making of *Yearning* was to reach as wide an audience as possible, which meant that it would be a serial for the masses. This serial was a mile-stone in TV programme development.

By the time Wang Shuo was invited to join the script writing group, he was already famous for his films and his stories, and had a lot of experience as a film editor producing films for the commercial market. Wang Shuo recalled that the concept of creating a script had changed:

'Once I got into this group creating the TV serial, I felt that this time it was different from before, everybody had reached a common understanding. This was not personal creation: everybody put aside their own ambitions and value concepts. This drama was for ordinary people, therefore the theme and style of the drama should respect ordinary people's values and customs. So what are ordinary people's values and customs? Everybody agreed about this: that they are the traditional Chinese values: spreading kindness and suppressing evil, judging people according to high moral standards; praising truth, kindness and beauty; castigating the false, evil and ugly; justice will overcome evil in the end; good people will have peaceful lives, and bad people will be punished during their present lives.'⁴⁵¹

⁴⁵⁰ *Si shi tong tang* 四世同堂 (Four Generation Family) was written in the 1940s by Lao She, and describes the life of ordinary Beijing people during the Japanese occupation.

⁴⁵¹ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, pp.8-9

They did not start to create the story from reality, or from emotional or artistic pursuits; instead they started by thinking about the audience, and tried to praise ordinary people's beliefs, and traditional Chinese moral values.

Wang Shuo and the other writers put forward ideas and suggestions about the plot, arranged roles, designed the characters in terms of their status and the relationships between them. The process of making up the story was described as being similar to 'doing a maths question, and achieving balance', Wang said:

'If there is a good person, then we should also arrange to have a not very good person; one person lives in the alley, another lives in an apartment building; one is enthusiastic, the other, silent; if this person is extremely good, then on the another side of the scale, put all the unlucky things on her head, only by doing this can we allow her to be continuously good. All the characteristics and particularities of the roles had to be allocated in advance, like ju 车, ma 马 and pao 炮 in Chinese chess. Some can only go straight, some can only go along an oblique line, some can only jump one to hit the other; this is the only way to play chess well. We call it stereotyping—each does his or her duty.'⁴⁵²

Completely different from the original creative writing carried out by a writer, this arrangement of the characters and plot is very much like creating a robotic performance or a game, rather than emphasising people's emotions or closely reflecting reality. The game can be simply formed and repeatedly re-created, a characteristic of popular cultural products. The critic Wang Yichuan commented:

'It can also succeed by using a playful attitude to make up the story, but even if it is admired as an unprecedented success, this undoubtedly destroys the sense of mission and seriousness of attitude to writing, which are built on a sense of tragedy.'⁴⁵³

⁴⁵² Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.10

⁴⁵³ Wang Yichuan 王一川, 'Cong beijuxing dao xijuxing' 从悲剧性到喜剧性 (From Tragedy to Comedy), *Zhongguo qingnian yanjiu* 中国青年研究 (China Youth Study), 1994, vol. 1, pp.16-17

If even a tragic story can be written with a game-playing attitude, then comedy making will have an even more 'game-playing' attitude in it. After *Yearning*, many makers of TV serials imitated this method of making up stories.

In order to produce a long TV serial, it is not possible to rely on a single writer working carefully to create a product of high artistic merit, since there is not enough time. It requires something like an industrial production line. The creative group must have good management and be efficient, since it has to meet the specifications for the product. In the process of making mass cultural products, the conflict between pursuing artistic ideals and meeting the demands of the consumer became apparent. Writers had to sacrifice their personalities, their artistic ideals, and even create a style based on the needs of the masses.⁴⁵⁴ Writers' artistic and cultural personalities become submerged in this mass product.⁴⁵⁵ *Yearning* broke with existing theory and tradition in TV serial making. Satisfying the emotional needs of the audience became a feature of the writers' artistic endeavour.

The low cost, the speed of production, and the potential for success and commercial profits boosted indoor drama making in China. The number of TV serials made sharply increased from 2,000 in 1989 to 5,000 in 1991. *Yearning* marked the beginning of the emergence of a mass culture 大众文化, and at the same time it marked the change from the age of paper media (newspapers, magazines) to that of visual media (TV, computers). It also marked the shift in the focus of the cultural field from literature and film to television.

⁴⁵⁴ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.9

⁴⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.10

Stories of the Editorial Office

After the success of *Yearning*, Zheng Xiaolong, from the Beijing Television Art Centre, invited Wang Shuo, Feng Xiaogang and others to write the script for a new TV serial. Indoor drama is always full of dialogue, and this was Wang Shuo's forte. Zheng Xiaolong was attracted to Wang Shuo's language style, and asked others to write in this style and then had Wang Shuo finalise the manuscript.⁴⁵⁶ Several people attempted this. However, Feng Xiaogang was the only one selected to co-write with Wang Shuo.⁴⁵⁷ *Bianjibu de gushi* 编辑部的故事 (Stories of the Editorial Office), was broadcast in 1991 and contained 18 stories over 25 episodes. Wang Shuo wrote thirteen of these, while Feng Xiaogang wrote twelve. The language was based mainly on Wang Shuo's 'tiaokan' style. The Beijing TV Art Centre decided to use the script of *Stories of the Editorial Office* to make a comedy serial, the first to be made in Chinese television history. *Yearning* had made audiences cry, and *Stories of the Editorial Office* was intended to make them laugh, so the two serials were in contrast to one another.

Strict Censorship

Censorship of TV serial had now become even stricter, after *Yearning* had made the authorities realise how a TV serial could be a powerful instrument of mass indoctrination. The Beijing TV Art Centre was strictly controlled by the Beijing

⁴⁵⁶ Yang Jun 杨君, 'Zheng Xiaolong: zai 'Beijingren zai Niuyue' zhihou' 郑晓龙: 在<北京人在纽约>之后 (Zheng Xiaolong: After 'Beijingese in New York'), quoted from <http://joy.fm365.com/yangjun/chat/zhenxiaolong.htm>

⁴⁵⁷ Feng Xiaogang admits his practising his language style with Wang Shuo at that time benefited his 'new year films' in the late 1990s. See Chapter III on Film.

authorities, and the script of *Stories of the Editorial Office* had to be sent to them for examination. The deputy party secretary of Beijing city, Wang Guang 王光, and the standing committee member and director of the Beijing city propaganda department, Li Zhijian 李志坚, read the script of *Stories of the Editorial Office*, and wrote letters to the Beijing TV Art Centre. Wang Guang wrote:

‘Serious and sensitive political problems should not be used as material for ironic treatment.....do your best to avoid vulgar language, gestures and plots.’⁴⁵⁸

And Li Zhijian wrote:

‘Light comedy is one type of serials. If it can be completed quickly, Beijing will be able rapidly to take over this field, and this will be helpful to the overall situation.’⁴⁵⁹

Political issues and the great potential influence of this TV serial on the whole country was an issue of particular concern to these political leaders, especially since it was produced in Beijing, where people in the cultural field acted as leaders of the national cultural scene. There was great strategic significance in the making of this TV serial against the background of the continued tense situation in the country.

When shooting began for *Stories of the Editorial Office*, Li and Wang came to visit the studio and watch some pilots from the serial. According to their suggestions, the script was adjusted and revised, and every episode, every paragraph and every line had to be gone through two or three times.⁴⁶⁰ The production process was so stressful

⁴⁵⁸ Zhang Yongjing 张永经, (ed.) *Beijing dianshi yishu zhongxin shi nian huishou* 北京电视艺术中心十年回首 (Review of Ten Years of the Beijing Television Art Centre), Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社 (Chinese Drama Publisher), p.213

⁴⁵⁹ Zhang Yongjing, (ed.) *Review of Ten Years of the Beijing Television Art Centre*, p.213

⁴⁶⁰ *ibid.*

because everybody wanted to avoid making political mistakes. TV serials had first to meet political criteria and secondly satisfy audience demands for entertainment. It was almost impossible to avoid compromising in order to conform to mainstream ideological tendencies in the serial, as people had in *Yearning*.

Most of the production staff were people who had worked on *Yearning*, and many were young people in their thirties. At the same time as trying to avoid touching on any political issues, Wang Shuo expressed his concern over audience reaction saying:

‘The biggest worry is that the audience will not laugh. From the director to the actors and actresses, they all work with one purpose in mind, that is to make the audience laugh. We even deliberately got rid of some parts which might mistakenly allow the attention of the audience to wander, such as satirising political news. This was all abandoned, just because we were worried that some people might say there was some profound meaning in it. However, we had no choice.’⁴⁶¹

Implicitly Wang Shuo is here conceding that his biggest worry was not audience reaction but political censorship. The Beijing TV Art Centre decided on the required style for the serial at the beginning, which was ‘refined and healthy’ 高雅健康, and stipulated that material must come from life, and any exaggeration must be based on reality.⁴⁶² This objective was achieved and the censorship was passed. Of course, Wang Shuo and the other editor, Feng Xiaogang, had their own thoughts:

‘(We) stick to one major principle: only deal with social problems, not political problems, then it will not be killed off.’⁴⁶³

⁴⁶¹ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p49

⁴⁶² Zhang Yongjing (ed.), *Review of Ten Years of the Beijing Television Art Centre*, p.218

⁴⁶³ Wen Xichui 温细锤 & Cai Yingzhou 蔡盈洲, ‘Lun jiushi niandai guonei tongshu dianshiju chuangzuo’ 论九十年代国内通俗电视剧创作 (National Popular Television Creation in the 1990s), *Dianying Chuangzuo* 电影创作 (Cinematic Creation), 2001, vol. 1, pp.73-77, originally in Feng Xiaogang & Wang Shuo (ed.) ‘*Bianjibu de gushi*’ *jingcai duibai xinshang* <编辑部的故事> 精彩对白欣赏 (Appreciation of the Excellent Dialogue in *Stories of the Editorial Office*), p.5, Beijing: Zhongguo guang-dian chubanshe, 1992 (把住一个大原则, 只触及社会问题, 不涉及体制问题, 就不会被枪毙.)

Their satire did not touch on the political system, and Wang Shuo's 'tiaokan' language style performed the function of helping to alleviate the frustrations stemming from the unhappy experiences people suffered in life. The leading actor Ge You became the most adept at putting Wang Shuo's language style across to an audience; he used Wang Shuo himself as the original model for his performance.⁴⁶⁴

Stories of the Editorial Office has been broadcast a total of 140 times on different TV stations around China. It had a dramatic effect following on from *Yearning*, and was considered to be a 'cultural consumption phenomenon' 文化消费现象 with a profound meaning for the early 1990s.⁴⁶⁵ It marked the start of 'urban comedy' and 'situation comedy', which together form one of the main types of TV serials today: comedy, martial arts and romance. In 1993, *Stories of the Editorial Office* won the government television award 'Fei tian jiang' 飞天奖 (Flying in the Sky Award), previously won by *Yearning*. These two TV serials were turning points in the history of Chinese TV serial production. Firstly, the group design and planning technique and industrial production-line methods contributed greatly to the success of the serial. It was now clear that individual creative works could not compete with group products, hence TV serial making has gone down the road of industrial production. Secondly, these two TV serials were very influential among ordinary people, won government awards, and were the focus of cultural and media attention. Thirdly, these products had a much greater effect on audiences than serious literary and art works; TV serial

⁴⁶⁴ Ge You, 'Wang Shuo ye-zai-bian' 王朔也在变 (Wang Shuo is Also Changing), *Wang Shuo in Celebrities' Eyes*, p.176

⁴⁶⁵ Rao Shuguang 饶曙光, 'Hou xiandai zhuyi wenhua yu dangdai Zhongguo dianying dianshi' 后现代主义文化与当代中国电影电视 (Post-Modernist Culture and Contemporary Chinese Film and Television), *Dangdai dianying* 当代电影 (Contemporary Cinema), 1994, vol. 2, pp.75-81

and film makers in the rest of the country began to imitate them, leading to a schism with 'serious' culture, and the emergence of a new mass culture trend.⁴⁶⁶

Focus on Social Phenomena

The focus of society had changed from politics to economics, and economic issues became more and more important. Ordinary people were facing an even more difficult economic situation than before: they worked hard to make a living during the day, and in the evenings all they wanted to do was have a rest and watch something they could identify with, something that echoed the daily lives of ordinary people.

Stories of the Editorial Office focuses on six editors of the magazine *Renjian zhinan* 人间指南 (People's Guide), who are all kind-hearted people, willing to help others. The stories take place in the small editorial office, and reflect the many problems and phenomena of society.

The stories deal with how to run a magazine in the commercial age when distribution numbers are going down, and everybody is competing to be the leader of the editorial office; they criticise dining out on public funds and the lack of professional morality of some writers; the stories satirise people who 'go through the back door' to get what they want, such as one writer who uses every possible opportunity to establish social relationships with all the editors in the office in order to get her story published. One story points out that everybody should obey public transport regulations for the safety

⁴⁶⁶ Wang Yichuan 王一川, 'Yu yingshi gongwu de ershi shiji jiushi niandai de Beijing wenxue' 与影视共舞的20世纪90年代的北京文学 (Twentieth Century 1990s Beijing Literature Dancing with Film and TV), *Beijing shehui kexue* 北京社会科学 (Beijing Social Science), 2003, vol. 1, pp. 89-107

of both themselves and others; another deals with how people should treat good and bad babysitters; one episode extols the virtues of disabled people who work hard to make an independent living; another deals with weight problems and dieting.

These stories are relatively independent of each other, but the editors link the stories together in order to reflect different aspects of society and people's lives. Audiences feel involved and interested in such stories. *Stories of the Editorial Office* employs the ironic 'tiaokan' style, with the strategy of 'small criticisms being a big help' 小骂大帮忙. This means that mild criticisms are made of many social phenomena to help officials manage society, to encourage ordinary people to cooperate with the authorities and obey the law; the serial contributes to a change in the general mood of society, and strongly reflects mainstream ideology.

Some phrases from the TV serial became popular catch-phrases which captured the mood of the times, such as: 'Money is not everything, but without money you can't do anything' 金钱不是万能的, 但没有钱却是万万不能的. This satirises both the worship of money in the current commercially oriented society, and also the traditional stubborn insistence on looking down on money. Another phrase was: 'revolution is inviting a guest to have a meal' 革命就是请客吃饭. This satirises the ridiculous phenomenon of officials lavishly dining out on public funds. Such phrases reflect the complex attitudes of ordinary people towards new and old phenomena in a changing society.

Two Generations of Intellectuals

Wang Shuo continued to satirise intellectuals in *Stories of the Editorial Office*. Characters are skilfully and carefully designed. By using different combinations of characteristics, age and gender, he constructed six contrasting editors. Three of them are older generation intellectuals, while the other three are younger generation intellectuals. Among them are two female editors; one is of the older generation, the other of the younger generation. The other four editors are male, two are of the older generation, the other two of the younger generation. The democratic atmosphere in the editorial office encourages everybody to speak freely without holding back. The younger generation of editors is portrayed as more positive than the old. Among the older generation, Sister Niu holds orthodox ideas and stubborn views on society, and Liu Shuhou is pedantic and selfish; as members of the older generation, they tend to use the language of mainstream ideology, and although they are intellectuals, they seem sunk in the same everyday trivia as ordinary people. The old image of intellectuals as high-minded, serious and well-educated, which is stamped indelibly on people's minds, is challenged here. Young editors such as Li Dongbao, Ge Ling and Yu Deli have become a new generation of ordinary people rather than a new generation of intellectuals. The critic Chen Xiaoming commented on Wang Shuo's attitude towards intellectuals:

'He tears the synthetic mask off the 'Man with a capital M' 大写的人 of New Era literature.....To Wang Shuo, a 'human being' is neither noble nor base; there are just different ways of living. The 'real people' Wang Shuo is searching for—Wang Shuo calls them new 'socialist people' - are modern urban people who intend to get rid of all political barriers and throw off the burden of tradition.'⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁷ Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, *Wenxue chaoyue* 文学超越 (Transcending Literature), p.128

Using comedy to satirise intellectuals is what Wang Shuo does in many of his fictional works, for instance, *You Are Not An Ordinary Man*. The TV serial helped to portray these characters in a more lively way, and reach a much wider audience. Compared with his stories, the irony applied to intellectuals is gentler in the TV serial. The editors in *Stories of the Editorial Office* are more attractive than the intellectual characters in *Yearning* and in the film *The Operators*. The two generations of editors are united and work together harmoniously all the time, although they have different views on things. This is an ideal working environment which everybody dreams to have, and a far cry from the reality of most ordinary people, who have to deal with complex relationships and conflicts in their places of work. This includes those work places with a concentration of intellectuals. As Wang Shuo said, *Stories of the Editorial Office* is like *Yearning*, in that it enables people to dream.⁴⁶⁸

In order to avoid the tediousness of a serial all about intellectuals, there is a love-story theme among the younger generation editors running through the whole serial. The young editor Li Dongbao (male) is interested in Ge Ling (female), they often engage in banter and joke with each other, maintaining a warm relationship, which, however, never goes beyond friendship. This low-key love-interest adds spice to the atmosphere of the story and attracts a young audience.

⁴⁶⁸ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.47

Situation Comedy

The light comedy *Stories of the Editorial Office* created a model for TV situation comedies 情景喜剧. The director Ying Da 英达 adopted some of the characteristics of *Stories of the Editorial Office* to use in popular comedy TV soaps which now form part of the staple diet of current TV schedules in China.

Ying Da invited many people from artistic and dramatic circles to celebrate the 10th anniversary of situation comedy in November 2002. The review of works over the last ten years is fascinating: in November 1992, Ying Da, Wang Shuo and the scriptwriter Liang Zuo 梁左 talked all one night, during which the first ever Chinese situation comedy, *Wo ai wo jia* 我爱我家 (I Love My Family), was developed. It became a very popular TV serial of 120 episodes which was first broadcast in 1995. Ying Da admits that *I Love My Family* was indebted to Wang Shuo's *Stories of the Editorial Office* and various of his other works. Ying Da had studied in America, had noticed how popular situation comedy was there, and very much wanted to make China's own situation comedy. He also knew that a successful situation comedy must have a native style:

'At that time we did not have other things to learn from, we just followed the road which had been laid by Wang Shuo and went forward.....and fortunately later added things like Liang Zuo's quarrels, which made ours a bit different from *Stories of the Editorial Office*, otherwise it could have just have been a carbon copy of it.'⁴⁶⁹

Ying Da described the relationship between himself, Wang Shuo and Liang Zuo:

⁴⁶⁹ 'Zhuanfang Ying Da' 专访英达 (Interview with Ying Da), quoted from Qingjing xiju wang 情景喜剧网 (Situation Comedy Net), www.cnsitcom.com/article.asp?id=64

'If we are talking about the relationships between the three people, Wang Shuo is the designer, Liang Zuo is the editor and I am the director.'⁴⁷⁰

I Love My Family was an indoor drama, consisting principally of dialogues. The stories in each episode were relatively independent, and it employed Beijing local language with Wang Shuo's 'tiaokan' style. It tells stories about nine family members, and used the common American technique of adding the sound of audience laughter at appropriate points. After the success of *I Love My Family*, Ying Da continued to make numerous sitcoms, such as *Zhongguo canguan* 中国餐馆 (Chinese Restaurant) and *Houche dating* 候车大厅 (Waiting Room). Among them, *Xianren Ma dajie* 闲人马大姐 (Idle Sister Ma) was warmly welcomed by audiences and is currently still being broadcast in Beijing after starting two years ago.

Ying Da noticed that Southern audiences do not respond well to the use of Beijing dialect, so in order to overcome the dialect limitation, Ying Da made *Xi'an Hu jia* 西安虎家 (Hu Family of Xi'an), especially for people who speak the Northwest dialect, *Dongbei yijiaren* 东北一家人 (A Northeast Family) for people who speak the Northeast dialect, and *Xin qishier jia fangke* 新72家房客 (The 72 New Guests) for people who speak the Shanghai dialect. Ying Da had also tried to take into account the latest developments, for example in cooperating with Wang Shuo to make *Wangchong riji* 网虫日记 (Diary of an Internet Geek) to attract a young audience.

⁴⁷⁰ 'Ying Da: dianshi gaibian le sanbainian xinshang xiju de fangshi' 英达:电视改变了300年欣赏喜剧的方式 (Ying Da: Television has Changed the Method of Appreciating Comedy of the Last 300 years), quoted from Qingjing xiju wang 情景喜剧网 (Situation Comedy Net), www.cnsitcom.com/article.asp?id=65

Ying Da's situation comedies were influential not only in Beijing and the rest of China, but also in other Chinese-speaking regions of East Asia, such as Taiwan, which also started to make situation comedies influenced by Ying Da. Sitcoms are broadcast between 6:00 and 7:00pm in China, the second TV peak time,⁴⁷¹ when retired people and school students are the main audience. Situation comedy is still looked down on by the authorities; however, they have had to recognise its huge popularity and impact.

Wang Shuo's Commercial TV Serials

After the success of *Yearning* and *Stories of the Editorial Office*, Wang Shuo moved from writing stories to making TV serials and films, and participated in the making of numerous TV serials. This included adapting some of his stories for TV, such as *Guo ba yin* 过把瘾 (Enjoy) in 8 episodes adapted from his three love stories: *Enjoy then Die*, *Losing My Love Forever* and *Nobody Cheers*. For the most part, he acted as the editor or planner for the serials, as in *Ai ni mei shangliang* 爱你没商量 (I Love You Unconditionally), *Hai ma gewuting* 海马歌舞厅 (The Seahorse Dance Hall), etc. These TV serials were mass culture products, whose main purpose was commercial profit.

Apart from the great influence a TV serial can have on an audience, the most important aspect is the potential commercial profit for the television industry. The commercial elements in the serial became more obvious in *Stories of the Editorial Office*. This incorporated an advertisement for a mineral water kettle within the serial

⁴⁷¹ The main TV peak time is between 7:00pm-9:00pm.

itself, in scenes in which the principal actor and actress acted.⁴⁷² This ‘soft advertising’ (软广告) was immediately copied by many other serials.

Two million yuan was invested in *I Love You Unconditionally*, and it was sold for 3.5 million to Chinese Central Television (CCTV),⁴⁷³ a record price at that time.⁴⁷⁴ Although it was not a successful TV serial and was criticised, however it sent a clear message that the commercialisation of a TV serial could reap considerable financial rewards; since then the TV serial market has expanded considerably. This also helped TV serials connected with Wang Shuo to sell well, such as *Qing bo 315 请拨 315* (Please Dial 315), and TV serials made by Wang Shuo’s Good Dream Film and TV Company, such as *Ground Covered in Chicken Feathers*, *The Dark Side of the Moon*.

There is official recognition that TV serials are expected to entertain people, but they are also expected to have educational significance and promote traditional values. It is very difficult to incorporate all these official requirements into the TV serial makers’ style and combine them into a popular TV serial for a mass audience with the elements needed for commercial success. The commercial aspect has already become the dominant element in the making of a TV serial; the mainstream ideological content is still strong too; what they are particularly lacking is artistic quality with weak scripts, poor acting and technical deficiencies, etc. These elements: poor quality,

⁴⁷² Rao Shuguang 饶曙光, ‘Post-Modernist Culture and Contemporary Chinese Film and Television’, *Contemporary Cinema*, 1994, vol. 2, pp.75-81

⁴⁷³ Wu Xiaoli 吴小丽, ‘Dui dianshiju ‘hongdong xiaoying’ de sikao’ 对电视剧 ‘轰动效应’ 的思考 (The Thinking behind the ‘Shock Effect’ of TV Serials), *Shanghai daxue xuebao* 上海大学学报 (Journal of Shanghai University), 1995, vol. 4, pp.12-16; Wei Bin 渭滨, Meng Gu 孟固, ‘Dianshi juben mianmian guan’ 电视剧本面面观 (Aspects of the Scripts of TV Serials), *Shengxiang shijie* 声像世界 (Voice and Screen World), 1994, vol. pp.43-44

⁴⁷⁴ Zeng Qingrui 曾庆瑞, ‘Shaowang dianshiju de jingshen jiayuan’ 守望电视剧的精神家园 (上) (Watching the Spiritual Home of TV Serials, First Half), *Hangzhou shifan xueyuan xuebao* 杭州师范学院学报 (Journal of Hangzhou Teachers College), 2000, vol.3, pp.70-79

vulgar taste and a pursuit of profit have lost TV serials a large proportion of their audience, especially among intellectuals. The average number of channels that audiences in urban areas can receive is 15; in big cities like Beijing, audiences can receive up to 40 channels.⁴⁷⁵ There are channels with specific themes, such as the sports channel and film channel; but apart from these the rest are all TV stations belonging to different provinces. They have virtually the same types of programmes as Beijing, and it is often possible to see the same TV serial broadcast by different channels one after another. The development of the internet is so quick that TV serials are losing younger audiences to the net. In addition to competition from other media, TV serials are also facing competition from other types of TV programme, such as *Kuaile 52 快乐* (Happy 52), a quiz programme, and *Shihua shishuo 实话实说* (Tell the Truth), a popular talk show about current events and social phenomena. At the same time, TV serials made in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea go in popular waves around the country; an example is the Taiwan-directed *Huanzhu gege 还珠格格* (Huanzhu Princess).⁴⁷⁶ The biggest cause for concern, however, is the mainland TV serial itself, which has abandoned its original pursuit of artistic quality in the process of commercialisation.

Wang Shuo's involvement in making commercial TV serial was halted temporarily, and later much reduced, after the ban placed on his films and his other works in 1996. Wang Shuo often likes to use TV serials to present his ideas, rather than just in order to make money. For instance, *Ground Covered in Chicken Feathers* and *The Dark Side of the Moon* were not permitted to be broadcast in the Beijing area because of

⁴⁷⁵ Jia Leilei 贾磊磊, 'The History and Current Situation of Chinese Television Serials', *Research on Literature and Art*, 2001, vol. 6, p.35

⁴⁷⁶ *Huanzhu Princess* was made by a Taiwanese company with Taiwanese investment and a Taiwanese director, but located in mainland China with some mainland actors.

their satirical comments on current events. This meant these TV serials lost the opportunity to be more influential and successful in Beijing, China's cultural capital.

Wang Shuo said:

'When we were making TV serials, I still had dreams, and I hoped to put my feelings and personal interests into them, and to put across my view of the world. I was arrogant and naïve, and thought that I could change the world.'⁴⁷⁷

Wang Shuo's dreams conflicted with his ambition to achieve commercial success. He is now considered to be more of a designer of mass culture than someone who puts these ideas into practice. There are more and more young people getting into the television industry, and Wang has run out of energy to push for further developments, and has returned to his writing career.

When the Beijing TV Art Centre celebrated its 20th anniversary in August 2002, people gave high praise to Wang Shuo for his contribution to the Centre:

'Wang Shuo has had an influence on the three most famous directors of the Beijing TV Art Centre: Zheng Xiaolong, Feng Xiaogang and Zhao Baogang 赵宝刚, as every viewer who is concerned about the creative work behind Chinese TV serials can see.'⁴⁷⁸

An even more important aspect of Wang Shuo's contribution to TV serials was his emphasis on contemporary materials and his special language style, which allowed the Beijing TV Art Centre to prosper without having to resort to making historical TV serials about emperors and officials, unlike many others around the country. Because

⁴⁷⁷ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.19

⁴⁷⁸ 'Cengjing Wang Shuo' 曾经王朔 (Once Upon a Time Wang Shuo), *Beijing qingnian bao* 北京青年报 (Beijing Youth), 27/09/2002, quoted from www.bjyouth.com/article.jsp?oid=1284424

of Wang's talent for language, the Beijing TV Art Centre was able to introduce a new type of speaking style, that of ordinary people. Wang Shuo's influence on the Beijing TV Art Centre has been compared with Lao She's influence on the Beijing People's Art Theatre.⁴⁷⁹ This contribution was not just to the Beijing TV Art Centre, but was to the whole TV serial industry and to popular culture in general.

⁴⁷⁹ *ibid.* Beijing renmin yishu juyuan 北京人民艺术剧院 is the most famous theatre group with the highest artistic quality in China. Famous productions include Lao She's Chaguan 茶馆 (Tea House).

Chapter V

Wang Shuo and the Publishing Market

One critic, who was comparing Wang Shuo to the ‘female Wang Shuo’, the writer, Xu Kun, claimed:

‘The main difference between the two is that Wang Shuo practices what he ‘preaches’—entrepreneurship—while Xu Kun remains in the literary arena, as a writer and critic.’⁴⁸⁰

This is the main difference between Wang Shuo and almost any other Chinese writer before the early 1990s.

‘Wang Shuo’s deviance from the zeitgeist of the 1980s cannot be captured in sheer thematic terms. His is the first example of a ‘marketized’ literature that promotes ‘bestseller consciousness’ (changxiao yishi) above all else. It is this conscious appeal to the entertainment and commodity value of storytelling that marks Wang Shuo’s distinct departure from the experimentalists, who might sound as playful and impious as Wang Shuo himself.’⁴⁸¹

The Payment System for Writers

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, writers, critics and people who worked in the cultural field all received a regular salary from the government, and were treated in the same way as people who worked in other jobs. There were therefore long periods of time when payment for writing was merely symbolic, and even this symbolic payment was often abolished because it was seen as a ‘special

⁴⁸⁰ Claire Huot, *China’s New Cultural Scene*, p.49. Xu Kun 徐坤 is called a ‘female Wang Shuo’ on account of her satirical style of writing. See also Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Xu Kun: Xixi zhushen* 徐坤: 嬉戏诸神 (Xu Kun: Playing with the Gods), *Zaoyu jiqing* 遭遇激情 (Encountering Passion), Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe 武汉: 长江文艺出版社, 1997, pp.314-327

⁴⁸¹ Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics and Ideology in Deng’s China*, p.262

right'. In September 1958, Yao Wen Yuan 姚文元⁴⁸² wrote an article about payment for writing, in which he said that people should eliminate the difference between brain work and physical work, and thus suggested that writers should not receive any payment for their writing. During the Great Leap Forward 大跃进, many places abolished payment for writing.⁴⁸³ In 1962, some writers brought up this question of payments, and since the political situation was more relaxed at that time, pro rata payment for manuscripts was resumed. In January 1966, because the political situation had changed, payment for writing was again reduced, and abolished completely during the Cultural Revolution. In April 1977, payment for writing was resumed, although it was reduced from the 7-14 yuan per thousand words of the 1950s to 2-7 yuan per thousand words. In 1983, writers protested against the unreasonable levels of payment for writing. In August 1984, artists and writers, including Qi Gong 启功, Wu Zuguang 吴祖光 and Ye Junjian 叶君健, suggested adjusting the payment standards.⁴⁸⁴ Following economic developments and the introduction of commercial concepts into people's lives, the call demanding payment for writing to reflect the creative value of the literary work became louder and louder.

Writers not only called for an increase in the payment for writing that would indicate some respect for creative work, but also wanted to improve their living conditions. By 1990 literary magazines made payment according to an official rate of 25 to 40 yuan per thousand words, although usually writers received 30 yuan per thousand words or less. If one takes inflation into account, this amounts to no higher than the 7-14 yuan

⁴⁸² Yao Wen Yuan 姚文元 was a member of the 'Gang of Four' 四人帮 during the Cultural Revolution, who was in charge of official ideology.

⁴⁸³ Qi Shuyu 祁述裕, 'Shichang jingji xia de Zhongguo wenxue yishu' 市场经济下的中国文学艺术 (Chinese Literature and Art under the Market Economy), p.35. Beijing: Beijing Daxue chubanshe, 1998.

⁴⁸⁴ Qi Shuyu, *Chinese Literature and Art under the Market Economy*, p36.

per thousand words of the 1950s. Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮 complained that he spent two years writing a novel and only received 5000 yuan for it.⁴⁸⁵ Payments to film script-writers were often so low that the film budget did not include them.

Literary products in the market were either produced by writers working in the government work units or came from Hong Kong, Taiwan and abroad. There were very few people who remained outside the official system who could make a living from writing. Wang Shuo is the first successful native writer of bestsellers since 1949.⁴⁸⁶

Different Approaches

Wang Shuo was the first self-employed professional writer in the Chinese literary world since 1949. There were still very few private companies or self-employed people in society in the early 80s. To this day writers, as members of the Chinese Writers' Association, receive a salary whether they publish any work or not. For people like Wang Shuo, however, if they have no publications, they have no income. This has forced Wang Shuo to take a completely different approach to writing from other Chinese writers. Wang Shuo had to pay great attention to the needs of readers and the market. As an unknown new writer, he thought very carefully about what kind of story could be successfully published in the severely controlled publication system.

When Wang Shuo recalls his early period of writing, he thinks that his experiences in business helped him to achieve market success in the writing profession:

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., p35

⁴⁸⁶ Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Wu zhong fengjing* 雾中风景 (Scenes in the Fog), p.447

‘Although I did not succeed in business, the experience of doing business taught me a lesson: it allowed me to see with a businessman’s eyes. I knew what would be easy to sell. At the time I chose to write *Air Hostess*, I did not have to write this story, however the topic and the profession of an air hostess in the eyes of readers and editors were mysterious, and I wrote things about girls, who were easily flattered. As I expected, although I did not know the editor of *Dangdai* 当代, it was not long after I had sent it that they sought me out and wanted have a talk. If I had written about a peasant, maybe the outcome would have been different.’⁴⁸⁷

Wang Shuo tried hard to write popular stories to entertain people, including his series of detective stories about criminal cases investigated by the detective Shan Liren 单立人, such as the story ‘Wo shi lang’ 我是狼 (I Am A Wolf). Although writing detective stories is not Wang Shuo’s forte, and his stories are not very impressive, nor did they provide him with much income, however, the fact that he wrote them shows how very determined he is to write to entertain ordinary people. Wang Shuo’s attempts at writing love stories are relatively much more successful; all his love stories have been made into films and TV serials, including the stories *Losing My Love Forever* and *Nobody Cheers*. Wang Shuo consciously tries to align himself with popular taste.

Wang Shuo openly talked about his life story; this was not a life story considered respectable by the literary field, since it included accounts of his being arrested twice by the police, going to prison for three months when he was a teenager, of his living off his girlfriend instead of earning his own living. As revealed in the reporter Zuo Shula’s 左舒拉 article ‘Wang Shuo—A ‘Vulgar’ Man Who Dares to Ignore Convention’,⁴⁸⁸ these are not activities which normal people would expect from a

⁴⁸⁷ Wang Shuo, *I Am Wang Shuo*, pp.20-21

⁴⁸⁸ Zuo Shula 左舒拉, ‘Wang Shuo—yi ge ganyu miaoshi changgui de ‘suren’’ 王朔—一个敢于藐视常规的‘俗人’ (Wang Shuo—A ‘Vulgar’ Man Who Dares to Ignore Convention), *Dazhong dianying* 大众电影 (Popular Film), 1989, vol.6, pp.14-15, and vol.7, pp.10-13

writer, supposedly an 'engineer of the human soul'. Since then Wang Shuo has had a very controversial image, quite apart from his stories. Being controversial provoked much criticism, but Wang Shuo found that publicising his personal history was a good way of attracting people's attention. No other writer had been willing, since socialist China came into being, to wash his dirty laundry in public in this way on the basis that any publicity is good. It seems clear that he was influenced by Western marketing skills, either consciously or unconsciously. By doing this, Wang Shuo enabled his readers to get to know him personally, including his shortcomings, so his readers then empathised with him, leading to increased interest in his books. Wang Shuo desperately wanted to be famous and to achieve commercial success.⁴⁸⁹ When his films were showing in cinemas and TV serials were being broadcast in 1992, Wang Shuo gave interviews to two to three hundred reporters to brief them on his works and his attitudes. As a result, every volume of his works sold more than ten thousand copies.⁴⁹⁰ This was a very large number of sales for a serious fiction writer at that time.

Wang Shuo is well aware of commercial principles and applies them in practice. He is a master at using the media. He often makes shocking or outrageous announcements in the media; for example, his appreciation of money is strongly apparent in the words:

'I am a crazy materialist. I find it difficult to refuse money and such things. I think having money is better than anything else.'⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁹ Nicholas D. Kristof & Sheryl Wudunn, *China Wakes*, 'Instead, his ambition is commercial success. 'I want to become famous,' he explained, 'I want to be motherfucking famous till I'm dizzy.' p.282

⁴⁹⁰ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.18

⁴⁹¹ Wang Shuo. *I Am Wang Shuo*, p.17

In the story *Half Seawater and Half Fire*, the attitude of being crazy about money really shows:

‘The biggest item of Renminbi (Chinese currency) is the ten yuan note, the smallest is the one fen coin.....no matter whether it’s the biggest or the smallest, this is what people love most.’⁴⁹²

Wang Shuo boasted that he would write a work as good as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, or at least as good as *Gone with the Wind*,⁴⁹³ a statement which was widely mocked by critics.

Reporting Wang Shuo’s latest shocking speech is profitable for the media. After the market economy was set up in China, media including newspapers, magazines, publishers, radio and TV stations, all had to be run as profit-making organisations rather than depending on the government, although the government does still provide part of the running costs for the official media. At the beginning of the commercialisation process, the media needed Wang Shuo as much as Wang Shuo needed the media, and Wang Shuo’s personal dream of becoming rich accorded with the trends in economic development. This was a great advantage for him. The cultural market emerged and popular literary and artistic works began to be produced, and were the most important cultural phenomena of the mid-1980s onwards.⁴⁹⁴

Wang Shuo has propagated his views on achieving commercial success with his writing on many occasions, publicly spreading the new concept of commercialised

⁴⁹² Wang Shuo, *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo*, vol. 1, p.126

⁴⁹³ *ibid.* p.99

⁴⁹⁴ Qi Shuyu, *Chinese Literature and Art under the Market Economy*, p.59

creative writing. Wang Shuo thinks: 'If you have produced a good thing, and you do not know how to sell it, then it is nothing.'⁴⁹⁵ A critic commented:

'Writing for money is a kind of statement; it is both a real living situation (Wang Shuo makes a living from writing) and a strategy for life; it can relieve the inner anxiety caused by trying to achieve an ideal, and it can also avoid the criticism of 'hypocrisy'.⁴⁹⁶

However, even at that time, if you discussed money with a publisher, they thought you were insulting them; if you talked to intellectuals about selling books, they would feel you were being undignified. Wang Shuo did not care whether he had a good name or a bad name: either would help him to become famous, which would be good for marketing.

People's expectations of spiritual products and material products are different: if a material product causes argument or attracts a bad name because of its poor quality, then this will cause people to stop buying it. By contrast, if a spiritual product causes argument or criticism reflecting different views, then that may provoke people's curiosity giving it an even bigger market and even greater social influence. This is the principle Wang Shuo works to.

Wang Shuo's words and behaviour show that the concept of the market conflicts with decadent hypocritical opinions about money. Wang Shuo thinks that people should be businessmen at heart, and that the two slogans: 'everything for the people' and

⁴⁹⁵ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.15

⁴⁹⁶ Ji Hongzhen 季红真, 'Wang Shuo: Chaoyue zibei' 王朔: 超越自悲 (Wang Shuo: Overcoming an Inferiority Complex), *Zhongshen de xiaoxiang* 众神的肖像 (Portrait of Polytheism), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1996. p.158

‘everything for money’ do not conflict with each other.⁴⁹⁷ When products are accepted by the greatest possible number of people, then the greatest possible profit is made.

After the violent crackdown of the 1989 Tian’anmen massacre, the people were rudely awoken from their idealistic dream of political reform and shifted their attention to economic pursuits. Wang Shuo recalled that period:

‘No one had any faith in politics anymore. People felt that reality was a bit absurd, and absurdity gives way eventually to satire. After 1989, my sales skyrocketed.’⁴⁹⁸

The national pursuit of democracy and freedom and punishment for corruption was seen to have failed after the 1989 democratic movement, and the people turned their focus to individual economic and financial benefits and making a good living, rather than towards any political or moral beliefs. People had ignored their poor living conditions and low incomes for so long that concern with earning a reasonable amount of money became the most urgent task in their lives.

Pioneering

Up to the beginning of the 1990s, writers had been paid according to the number of words they had written. This was not good for creative work, since when writers produced short essays or stories, they would be paid very little, and this was against writers’ interests. In 1992, Huayi 华艺 Press published the four-volume ‘Wang Shuo wenji’, setting a precedent as the first example of royalties being paid by a

⁴⁹⁷ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.24

⁴⁹⁸ Yu Wong, ‘Wang’s World’, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 8, 1996, pp.46-48

publisher.⁴⁹⁹ Huayi offered royalties of ten percent of the total sales, an extremely high payment which other writers had never received, but which was offered because Wang Shuo was already famous before the collection was published. It is more and more difficult for literature to have a 'shock effect' 轰动效应, and it is difficult to rely on one book to become famous, so a publisher has to do a lot of publicity work. Although Wang Shuo was quite well known at that time, Huayi Press printed 1.5 million pictures of him to stick up in every book-store and street stall in order to advertise his books.⁵⁰⁰

Four volume collections are always treated as great achievements, mirroring Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 four-volume collection, the most influential work since the founding of socialist China. Since Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 four-volume collection was published in the New Era, nobody had dared exceed the four volume limit for a living author's works. For literary writers, collections of their works are usually published after their death. Wang Shuo is the first contemporary writer who has had his works published in a four volume collection while still living, and in fact, was still in his early thirties. The first printing of Wang Shuo's collection consisted of 20,000 copies; this is a large number compared with Deng Xiaoping's *The Architect of the New Era*, which was only 7,500 copies.⁵⁰¹

In contemporary China, commercialised literary and art products have given a right of judgement to the people which they never had before, so from this point of view, the rise of popular culture is part of people's cultural rights and needs. The market's

⁴⁹⁹ Wang Shuo, *Wang Shuo wenji* 王朔文集 (The Collected Works of Wang Shuo)

⁵⁰⁰ Qi Shuyu, *Chinese Literature and Art under the Market Economy*, p.39

⁵⁰¹ Sheryl WuDunn, 'The Word from China's Kerouac: The Communists Are Uncool', *The New York Times Book Review*, 10 Jan. 1993, p.23

influence on culture is a reflection of the consumers' wishes, and is thus a triumph of cultural democracy.

Some people see the increasing commercialisation of literary and art products as a disaster, and think that the cultural market will only produce things without character, of low quality and vulgar taste. They also think that the people's ability to appreciate art and literature is diminishing. A debate on 'humanism' 人文精神 started in China's cultural world in 1993. In fact, people do not just passively accept all products from the cultural industry, they also respond to the cultural industry in terms of what they need. People constitute a multi-level and multi-dimensional mass, and there are different consumer groups limiting the specialist art format. There are various art formats in terms of thought, aim, meaning, and values, etc. At the beginning of the process of commercialisation, the terms 'serious literature' 严肃文学 and 'popular literature' 通俗文学 could not help critics to identify which group of consumers demanded which kind of work, and the criteria for criticising cultural products were confused, until, in the 1990s, new terms emerged in the cultural field, such as 'mass culture' 大众文化 and 'elite culture' 精英文化, which separated different groups of consumers. People were then able to determine from the new term that, for example, mass culture included commercial products designed to entertain the majority of consumers, and elite culture consisted of art products aimed at a minority of consumers such as intellectuals who were able to appreciate them, and possibly including products which were advanced or pioneering in some way. In addition to these two categories, cultural products which carry out a propaganda function on behalf of the government are categorised separately, under the term 'mainstream products' 主旋律作品. These classifications help writers and artists decide what kind

of work they want to produce, and assist critics by providing them with suitable criteria according to which they may make comments, and consumers can make a choice according to their needs.

Some people worry that writers may write only in order to make money. However, since writers' incomes come from their readers, if they only write for money and are not concerned with the quality of their books or articles, they will lose readers sooner or later; hence the market itself acts as a measure of quality. On the other hand, the authorities would not allow any cultural products that attacked the political system to be published, regardless of whether they are mass or elite cultural products.

Many of Wang Shuo's stories and all his TV serials are mass culture products. The TV serial editor, Li Xiaoming 李晓明, who has cooperated with Wang Shuo on making several TV serials, said that Wang Shuo knew how to conduct himself and how to protect himself politically.⁵⁰² Wang Meng has commented on Wang Shuo's sensitivity in protecting himself as well:

'He (Wang Shuo) does not seem to be very learned, but his IQ is quite high; he is very astute; he dares to hack and swing, and also pull the trigger at the right time—without touching the mouth of the gun.'⁵⁰³

Wang Shuo avoids criticising politics directly, instead he chooses to satirise the official language. Wang Shuo attacks all sorts of old and new political terminology in order to dispel the influence of this type of language on people, and expose

⁵⁰² Cheng Qing 程青, 'Jingcheng mingliu kan Wang Shuo' 京城名流侃王朔 (Celebrities of Beijing Chat About Wang Shuo), *Wang Shuo: dashi haishi pizi* 王朔: 大师还是痞子 (Wang Shuo: Master or Hooligan), p.184.

⁵⁰³ Ding Dong 丁东, Sun Min 孙珉, ed. *Shiji zhijiao de chongzhuang—Wang Meng xianxiang zhengminglu* 世纪之交的冲撞—王蒙现象争鸣录 (Collision at the Turn of Century—the Debate on the Wang Meng Phenomenon), Wang Meng, 'Duobi chonggao' 躲避崇高 (Evading Nobility), p.186 (他不像有多少学问, 但智商满高, 十分机智, 敢砍敢抡, 而适当搂着—不往枪口上碰.)

falsehoods, expressing the real feelings of the people without embellishment.⁵⁰⁴ His whole writing process has a very strong ideological intention. Wang Shuo uses the law to protect himself: he employed a legal adviser in the early 1990s, a rare thing for a writer.⁵⁰⁵ He bought himself health insurance and family property insurance.⁵⁰⁶ In 1992 there were very few people doing that either, since most were state employees with free medical care, a pension from the government when they retire, free schooling for their children, etc. Wang Shuo, as a self-employed writer, receives none of these benefits.

When Wang Shuo became a spokesman protecting his own interests, he affected the interests of every writer. For instance, he challenged the exploitatively low payments made to writers. For example, in a TV serial which cost a million yuan to make, the script writer is only paid 0.3% of the cost. Wang Shuo wanted to share in the huge profit which his works brought to the TV station.⁵⁰⁷

Wang Shuo was the most sought-after editor for films and TV serial from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, and he was paid much better for working on films and TV serials than for writing stories for literary magazines. Wang Shuo negotiates the payment with a publisher far earlier than other writers, bringing him a better deal and setting an example for other writers on how to negotiate better contracts with publishers, or the makers of films or TV serials. The woman writer Zhang Kangkang 张抗抗 said:

⁵⁰⁴ See Chapter II on Wang Shuo's Writing Style.

⁵⁰⁵ Yang Dongping 杨东平, *Chengshi jifeng* 城市季风 (Seasonal Wind in the Cities), p.550

⁵⁰⁶ Xing Ru 星如, 'Wang Shuo kan baoxian' 王朔侃保险 (Wang Shuo Chats About Insurance), *Zhongguo baoxian* 中国保险 (Chinese Insurance), 1999, vol. 10, p.31

⁵⁰⁷ Yang Dongping 杨东平, *Seasonal Wind in the Cities*, p.550

‘Maybe we can say that Wang Shuo is the first person who has woken up to business consciousness among contemporary writers. Some people have said that Wang Shuo’s biggest contribution is to increase the price for his ‘words’. This may be a joke, but starting from Wang Shuo, ‘buyers’ and ‘sellers’ now discuss the price of a manuscript, and writers will never again be controlled by the unified standard for works: now that we have the face to discuss the price openly, adjusting the buying and selling relationship becomes perfectly justifiable and irreproachable, and so Wang Shuo’s achievements cannot be ignored.’⁵⁰⁸

Wang Shuo has led the reform of payment in the cultural field. No writer wants to be paid poorly, as the old generation of writers were, so Wang Shuo and other writers set up a writers’ organisation to negotiate prices and protect writers’ interests. In January 1989, Wang Shuo, Wei Ren 魏人, Liu Yiran 刘毅然, Mo Yan 莫言, Su Lei 苏雷, Zhu Xiaoping 朱晓平, Liu Heng 刘恒 and another five writers altogether,⁵⁰⁹ set up a writers’ organisation called ‘Haima yingshi chuanguo zhongxin’ 海马影视创作中心 which was formally registered in 1992 under the Chinese Strategy and Management Institution 中国战略与管理研究会. This organisation is considered to be the first writers’ union in China.⁵¹⁰ Wang Shuo was the chairman of the organisation and thus demonstrated his leadership of the movement to market writers and their works. The purpose of the organisation was to apply commercial principles in the literary and art fields, to protect writers’ rights and interests, negotiating the price of the works according to their quality, and trying to obtain appropriate payment. The ‘Haima announcement’ declared that to ‘guarantee quality and to pursue benefits are the precepts which our cultural organisation will obey’.⁵¹¹ Since then writers have had more rights and stand a better chance of negotiating a good price for their works with publishers and with makers of films and TV programmes.

⁵⁰⁸ Liang Huan (ed.), *Wang Shuo in Celebrities’ Eyes*, p.125

⁵⁰⁹ All were young and well-known writers in the 1980s.

⁵¹⁰ Qi Shuyu, *Chinese Literature and Art Under the Market Economy*, p.36

⁵¹¹ *ibid.*

Poor Living Conditions of Writers

Wang Shuo's attitude towards writing and his concern to protect his own interests are the same as those of writers in the commercial age before 1949. Because people have lived in the socialist system for so long, they seem to have forgotten how ordinary writers made a living in the past. Most writers made a living by writing stories and articles for newspapers, magazines and publishers, including famous writers such as Yu Dafu 郁达夫, Ba Jin 巴金, and Xiao Hong 萧红. Chinese intellectuals treat Lu Xun 鲁迅 as their great model; he wrote down all the details of his income in his diary. In the 1930s, he left his teaching job at the university and in his later years made a living in Shanghai as a freelance writer. Lu Xun was very careful about the royalties he received from publishers: when his publishers delayed payment, Lu Xun would contact the publisher demanding the royalty. Chen Mingyuan 陈明远, who was a mathematics researcher working at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, used part of the time he spent in a labour camp during the Cultural Revolution to calculate Lu Xun's earnings based on his diary. From Lu Xun's income, he would be considered as middle class either at that time or in today's China;⁵¹² his income was sufficient to support him and his family in a secure lifestyle, and to satisfy his habit of taking his friends and family to eat in restaurants, and, most importantly, to sustain his independent thinking and battles with the opposition. Negotiating a fair deal and pursuing delayed payments is the way to protect writers' rights and interests, and is nothing to be ashamed of.

⁵¹² Chen Mingyuan 陈明远, 'Lu Xun yisheng zheng duoshao qian' 鲁迅一生挣多少钱 (How Much Money Lu Xun Made In His Life), *Xinhua wenzhai* 新华文摘 (Xinhua Abstract), 2000, vol.3, pp.94-95

Since economic principles had been redundant in society for decades, the traditional Confucian ethic found its way back into the minds of intellectuals, in which money was seen as a dirty, ugly and evil thing, which should not even be thought of, let alone mentioned. The businessman held the lowest status among all other careers, while to be an official and an intellectual were very much admired. The word for a businessman in Chinese is often ‘unscrupulous merchant’ 奸商, and an old Chinese saying is ‘no merchant is not unscrupulous’ 无奸不商. Businessmen were thus very much looked down on by intellectuals. Throughout imperial Chinese history, people’s social worth was always judged by their official rank, and Chinese society was ordered according to the system of ranking officials. The most important and the most problematic aspect of the New Era economic reforms has been to reform the old ways of thinking about the economy, money and businessmen.

Writers and other literary and art workers were expected to receive negligible financial reward from their decades of hard work. The writer Liu Xinwu 刘心武 spoke out against the situation of writers since 1949, and pointed out that no research had been carried out and no efforts had been made to improve the writer’s situation. Some people blamed Chinese writers for not accepting loneliness, poverty and frustration, and even expected them to write without any hope of being published and expected them to become ‘literary martyrs’ 文学烈士. This was ‘too strange and too cruel’.⁵¹³ Commercialisation in the cultural field has helped to change such ideas.

⁵¹³ Liu Xinwu 刘心武, ‘Huashuo ‘yan ya chun’’ 话说‘严雅纯’ (Talking About ‘Serious, Refined and Pure’), *Guangming ribao* 光明日报 (Guangming Daily), 30/03/1994, quoted from Huang Fayou 黄发有, ‘Ershi shiji Zhongguo ziyou xiezuo lungang (xia)’ 20世纪中国自由写作论纲 (下) (Discussion of

Since the New Era began, quite a few writers have died young, such as three winners of the Mao Dun Literature Award 茅盾文学奖, the highest literary award for Chinese writers. The first winner of the award (covering the period 1971-1981), Zhou Keqin 周克芹, for his novel *Xu Mao he ta de nu'ermen* 许茂和他的女儿们 (Xu Mao and His Daughters, 1979), died in 1990 at the age of 53; the second winner of the award (1982-1984), Muo Yingfeng 莫应丰, for his novel *Jiangjun yin* 将军吟 (The Song of the General, 1983), died in 1989 at the age of 51; while the third winner of the award (1985-1988), Lu Yao 路遥, for his novel *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界 (Ordinary World, 1986), died in 1992, aged only 42. Some commentators believe that the hard work of writing and the financial difficulties were the main reasons for these early deaths.⁵¹⁴

This situation exists not only in the literary field, but also in other fields where intellectuals work. The BBC Chinese Special Correspondent, Jiang Xun, reported that, according to a ten-year health survey of intellectuals in Beijing among scientists and artists, including writers, the average life expectancy has dropped from 59 years ten years ago to 54 years, which is 20 years less than the average life expectancy of

Twentieth Century Chinese Free Writing (Part Two)), *Wenyi pinglun* 文艺评论 (Literature and Art Review), 2001, vol.6, pp.18-27

⁵¹⁴ Qi Shuyu, *Chinese Literature and Art Under the Market Economy*, p.36; Han Shanshi 韩山石, 'Wo kan Lu Yao zhi si' 我看路遥之死 (How I see the Death of Lu Yao), *Dazhong ribao* 大众日报 (Masses' Daily) 02/05/2003, quoted from Dazhong wang 大众网 (Masses' Net) www.dzwww.com; 'Huainian Lu Yao' 怀念路遥 (In Remembrance of Lu Yao), 08/07/2003 Renmin wang 人民网 (People's Daily Net) www.booker.com.cn/gb/paper374/1/class037400005/hwz223843.htm; 'Guanyu 'Jiangjun yin'' 关于<将军吟> (About 'The Chant of the General'), Wenxue.shiye.wang 文学视界网 (Literary Field of Vision) www.white-collar.net/wx_hsl/dangdai/xd_02/044.htm originally published in *Dangdai* 当代 (Contemporary), 1999, vol.3; 'Diyijie—disijie Mao Dun wenxuejiang huojiang mingdan' 第一界—第四界茅盾文学奖获奖名单 (The Name List for the 1st to 4th Mao Dun Literature Awards), quoted from Renmin wang 人民网 (People's Daily Net) www.people.com.cn/GB/channel16/32/20001116/315577/html

the rest of the Beijing population.⁵¹⁵ The average life expectancy for scientists with posts in the Chinese Academy of Sciences was only 52.2 years, which is a shockingly young age. In the past five years (up to 2002), 134 experts and scholars from the seven institutes belonging to the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Beijing University have died, their average age at death being 53.3 years old. Extremely hard work, a low income, bad living conditions, and a poor quality of life, poor diet, smoking, irregular eating and sleeping patterns are the main causes of death. They are models of intellectual workers that nobody wanted to emulate.

The writer Liang Xiaosheng 梁晓声 wrote an article about the economic situation of writers, reviewing his own income from when he started work in 1979 up until 1998. This served as a reference for the whole generation of writers during that period. He is a writer from a younger generation than Liu Xinwu 刘心武, Jiang Zilong 蒋子龙, Chen Rong 谌容 and Zhang Jie 张洁, which means he stands more chance of obtaining better payment, since most of his works will have been published later than theirs. Liang Xiaosheng is almost from the same generation as Wang Shuo, since they both started writing within the New Era. He is a university graduate who worked as a literary editor at the Beijing Film Studio Literature Department (he later transferred to the Children's Film Studio), so he has a regular salary to cover his living expenses. His works started being publishing in 1981, the payment for writing at that time being 10-12 yuan per thousand words. By 1988, his collections of stories earned him around 15 yuan per thousand words. He and his wife had an income of 150 yuan a month, and three of them (they had one child) lived in a room of 13 square meters; he was 38

⁵¹⁵ Jiang Xun 江讯, 'Toushi Zhongguo: Yingnian zaoshi de yinli' 透视中国: 英年早逝的阴霾 (China Insight: Haze of Death at a Young Age), 02/12/2002, quoted from http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/chinese/china_news/newsid_2527000/25272991.stm

years old at that time, a member of the Chinese middle class, yet lived in very poor conditions. In the late 1990s, although around 10,000 to 40,000 copies had been printed of his various stories, he was generally paid 30-40 yuan per thousand words. One of his stories was bought by a TV serial company for a twenty episode serial, and he was paid 16,000 yuan after tax, which he thought was an 'unprecedented' fee for him. Despite the fact that Liang Xiaosheng is a very productive writer, and well known in the literary world, the various stories that were made into TV serials did not make him rich, and his writing income together with his salary can only provide him with an average living; Liang Xiaosheng is considered very fortunate among serious literary writers.⁵¹⁶

Since the mid-1990s, most writers' financial situations have not been as good as ordinary people who work in thriving factories, and much worse than people who work in Chinese and foreign joint-venture companies. The career of writer is no longer a high status one in society. More and more writers have changed their attitudes towards payment for publication. Many writers live in financial difficulties, and sometimes publishers do not send the payment on time. This includes the woman writer, Zhang Jie 张洁, who wrote an article entitled 'Bu zai qinggao' 不再清高 (Never Aloof Again):

'Recently a friend told me that some colleagues see me as a calculating vulgar person. Their grounds are: firstly, I directly asked the publisher who had asked me to write about the payment for writing; secondly, I had asked *Shiyue* 十月 magazine to pay me in advance, thirdly, with those magazines or newspapers who did not pay me on time or who never paid, I used the method of asking for the payment when I gave them the

⁵¹⁶ Liang Xiaosheng 梁晓声, 'Zhongguo dangdai zuojia de jingji zhuangkuang' 中国当代作家的经济状况 (The Economic Situation of Contemporary Chinese Writers), *Zhonghua dushu bao* 中华读书报 (Chinese Reader Daily), originally published in 'Zhongguo zhongchanzhe jiecheng' 中国中产者阶层 (The Chinese Middle Class), *Furong* 芙蓉 (Hibiscus), 1998, vol. 1 quoted from Guangming wang 光明网 (Guangming Daily Net) www.gmdaily.com.cn, 25/03/1998

manuscript, etc..... Some despicable person even said: 'I do not believe that Zhang Jie has reached the stage of being so poor as to need to be paid in advance.'⁵¹⁷

Zhang Jie tries to keep writing all the time, and pays a housemaid to do the shopping, cooking and cleaning. As a professional writer who is member of China's Association of Writers, Zhang Jie's salary is only enough to pay the monthly bills, she has no extra money for other living expenses, so she is very angry about the situation and said:

'I have never heard any fair comment about the poor payment of Chinese writers; on the contrary, they blame the poor writers for having the nerve to protect their interests, why? Above all, from now on, I have decided I will never be aloof again, so please do not raise me up, and do not hope that I will carry forward the good and aloof morality of intellectuals.'⁵¹⁸

There are many writers who live in the same difficult situation as Zhang Jie. The trend towards commercialisation is so strong that it could not be prevented from entering the literary field. However, it has positive effects on literature as well as negative ones, which is that literature has had to abandon its priestly image and stop preaching to the masses, and to abandon the aloof posture that keeps ordinary people at a distance.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁷ Zhang Jie, *Zhang Jie wenji* 张洁文集 (Collected Works of Zhang Jie), vol. 4, pp.512-515

⁵¹⁸ Zhang Jie, *Collected Works of Zhang Jie*, Vol. 4, pp.512-515

⁵¹⁹ Cai Shilian 蔡世连, 'Taoyi, chenlun, zhengjiu—jiushiniandai wentan geju he zouxiang' 逃逸.沉沦.拯救—九十年代文坛格局和走向 (Escape, Degradation, Deliverance—the Structure and Direction of the Literary World of the 1990s), *Qi Lu xuekan* 齐鲁学刊 (Journal of Qi Lu), 1998, vol. 1, pp.120-124

A Successful Model

Wang Shuo always tries to be at the forefront with new entrepreneurial ideas. He participated in the setting up of three companies in the early 1990s. The first one was the Haima TV and Film Creation Centre in 1989, formally registered in 1992. Wang Shuo organised writers to write TV serials or film scripts. The second company was the Good Dream TV and Film Planning Company 好梦影视策划公司, which cooperated with the Beijing TV Art Centre, making mainly TV serials and stage dramas. The third company was the Current Events Cultural Consultancy Company 时事文化咨询公司 cooperating with Shenzhen Xianke Company 深圳先科公司, to make mainly documentary films.⁵²⁰ Wang Shuo hoped that, through these companies, he would realise his ambitions in TV and film. Some of Wang Shuo's big plans were not achieved, such as buying the rights to the works of every emerging new writers he could in order to be able to adapt them into films and TV serials; and training a group of young people to become professional film and TV serial editors. In order to carry out these plans he would have needed 10 million yuan a year. However, his cultural companies had a wide sphere of influence at that time.⁵²¹ Wang Shuo was principally involved in creating original ideas and planning the scripts of TV serials and films; he did not take part in the management of the companies.⁵²²

⁵²⁰ Bai Ye 白烨, 'Xuanze de ziyou yu wenhua taishi' 选择的自由与文化态势 (Freedom of Choice and the Cultural Situation), *Jiushi niandai wencun* 九十年代文存 (Collected Articles of the 1990s), p.44

⁵²¹ The fourth company in which Wang Shuo played an important role was Wenhua zai Zhongguo 文化在中国 (Culture in China), an internet company of the late 1990s. At that time, running a website was fashionable. Wang Shuo was in charge of the literature forum, including doing interviews with well-known writers, such as the woman writer Chen Ran 陈染, and introducing new young writers. The internet company was closed down because of unprofitability.

⁵²² Jia Leilei 贾磊磊, 'Wo bu xiang yibeizi dang zuojia—yu Wang Shuo duihualu' 我不想一辈子当作家—与王朔对话录, (I Do Not Want To Be A Writer All My Life—Talking with Wang Shuo), *Guoji rencai jiaoliu* 国际人才交流 (International Exchange of Talent), 1995, vol. 4-5, pp.82-85

On 30th January 1993, *Chinese Youth* (newspaper) ran a special column entitled 'What has Wang Shuo brought us', and started a debate about the 'Wang Shuo phenomenon'. The overseas economic media was interested in Wang Shuo. For instance, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* published an article about him in 1992, in which it said that Wang Shuo's income in 1991 made him a '10,000 yuan man' 万元户 [the Chinese equivalent of a millionaire at that time] several times over.⁵²³ The *Economist* commented on the situation that Wang Shuo had stirred up in the literary world in 1992:

'Not only do they disparage Mr. Wang's writing, but they enviously compare his high earnings with the peanuts paid for their own tracts.'⁵²⁴

The New York Times Book Review ran a report on Wang Shuo in 1993. Sheryl WuDunn said:

'Authorities do not seem concerned about what is being called the Wang Shuo phenomenon; perhaps partly because his novels sell more in the streets than in the stores.'⁵²⁵

Wang Shuo's special value lies not only in the fact that he holds an unassailable position in the literary, TV and film worlds, but also because he has made a large number of speeches, and his economic behaviour has produced a unique philosophy and lifestyle. The writer Zheng Wanlong 郑万隆 said:

'Since the advent of New Era literature, many people have become famous because of one work, but only Wang Shuo has created a shock effect as a person.'⁵²⁶

⁵²³ Linda Jaivin, 'Sage of Peking', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 January 1992, pp.32-33

⁵²⁴ Beijing Correspondent, 'Living Dangerously with Mr. Wang', *The Economist*, November 28th-December 4th 1992, p.82

⁵²⁵ Sheryl WuDunn, 'The Word From China's Kerouac: The Communists Are Uncool', *The New York Times Book Review*, 10 Jan. 1993, p.3 and p.23

⁵²⁶ Cheng Ming 程明, 'Mingren tan Wang Shuo' 名人谈王朔 (Celebrities Talking about Wang Shuo), *Dongfang Yishu* 东方艺术 (Oriental Art), 1994, vol. 3, p.37

Wang Shuo has become the idol of many young people who want to become as successful as he is. The critic Lao Yu 老愚 said:

'I never see Wang Shuo as a worker who 'piles up characters'; Wang Shuo is a 'contemporary hero' who is never rewarded. If I cannot make my desire come true through order, the law, morality or intuitive knowledge, then I will degenerate totally. I do not admit principle and conscience. Wang Shuo speaks out from bottom of their hearts for many Chinese who have suffered setbacks and losses.'⁵²⁷

The 'desire to degenerate' 渴望堕落 (kewang duoluo) and to be a 'hooligan' became fashionable among writers and artists.⁵²⁸ The art critic Li Xianting described the changing attitudes of artists in the 1980s and 1990s:

'Get together a bunch of artists from the '80s and they talk about philosophy. Get together a bunch of artists from the '90s and they talk about money and getting girls.'⁵²⁹

If people want to 'play at life' (游戏人生 youxi rensheng), they need a financial foundation. Many self-employed people have emerged in the cultural field, including singers: the pop singer Na Ying 那英; film makers: Zhang Yuan 张元, Wu Wenguang 吴文光; actresses: Ma Xiaoqing 马晓晴; dancers: Tao Jin 陶金, etc. The 'painters' village' 画家村 was quite famous in early 1990s, when not only young painters from all over China came to Beijing to live in a village outside the Yuanmingyuan 圆明园 (Yuanming Park), but also other artists, writers, poets, photographers, etc. Most of them did not have jobs and relied on the help of friends; they came to Beijing to pursue a career and commercial success. The poet Xi Chuan 西川 talked about the numerous itinerant poets who asked him for food and money; he did his best to help

⁵²⁷ Lao Yu 老愚, Xu 序 (Introduction), *Wang Shuo, Master or Hooligan*, p.2

⁵²⁸ Guo Zhaodi 郭昭第, 'Xin shiqi wentan de jiazhi hualuo' 新时期文坛的价值滑落 (Slipping Values in the New Era Literary World), *Xiandai wenxue* 现代文学 (Modern Literature), 1996, vol.4, pp.17-19

⁵²⁹ Yang Dongping 杨东平, *Seasonal Wind in the Cities*, 1994, p. 548

until there were too many of them and he thought that they should take responsibility themselves for making a living.⁵³⁰ Later the ‘painters’ village’ became famous among Westerners in Beijing. Many artists’ works were bought by Westerners, making the artists rich very quickly; they bought houses and cars, and left the ‘painters’ village’.

Yang Dongping 杨东平 commented on this phenomenon:

‘When the lifestyle of the ‘players’ 顽主 and their playing attitude becomes a commonly recognised lifestyle for young people, ‘tiaokan’ is not only a fashion but also a kind of attitude to life. When artificial story language becomes a new urban popular language, then Wang Shuo transcends the situation of writing about himself, ‘playing’ at literature, making a living from writing, and he really becomes a guru for a certain kind of person.’⁵³¹

The trend to ‘drift to Beijing’ 北漂 (beipiao) became a common phenomenon among young people in the cultural field. Many young artists from other provinces went to Beijing seeking fame and fortune, including the actor Zhang Guoli 张国立, who acted in Wang Shuo’s film *The Operators*, and who gave up his job in Sichuan to come to Beijing looking for the opportunity to establish himself. In the late 1990s, he became a TV serial director and an actor in *Kang Xi weifu sifang* 康熙微服私访 (Emperor Kang Xi Travels Incognito) and *Wo zhe yibeizi* 我这一辈子 (My Life), based on the story by Lao She. However, many were not so successful.

Booming Publishing Market

A mature bestseller market is forming in China. Although the number of copies sold is far fewer than the American standard for a bestseller—more than 100,000 hardback copies and 200,000 paperback copies—even so, the Chinese bestseller market is

⁵³⁰ Mu Zhai 木斋, *Talking with Chinese Writers*, p.211

⁵³¹ Yang Dongping, *Seasonal Wind in the Cities*, p.551

growing very quickly. Since the 1990s, publishers have to earn money by publishing books in a competitive market without provoking any political problems, and writers are selected and rewarded according to their potential market profitability, though their individuality and creativity are also taken into account.

The media have begun to be used to stimulate the market. Jia Pingwa's novel *Fei du* 废都 (Ruined City) is an example. When Jia Pingwa had only just finished the manuscript of *Ruined City*, nearly ten publishers approached him to negotiate a publishing deal, some of them even taking cash with them in order to encourage him make a decision on the spot. Before *Ruined City* was published, reports on it had already appeared in various newspapers and radio programmes. It was called a 'contemporary *Jin ping mei*' 当代金瓶梅 and colourful pictures were printed to advertise the work and generate market interest. Reference to *Jin ping mei* may also be seen as a marketing ploy: *Jin ping mei* had been banned or restricted for much of the time since 1949 because of its erotic content. *Ruined City* suffered the same fate: it was banned soon after it was published, because it contains many depictions of sex scenes. It remains very popular in China, however, and can be obtained in some places outside Beijing.

The new free market in cultural products is a powerful influence on the direction in which literature and art are developing: consumer choice is resulting in much greater diversity. Consumers follow fashions, but at the same time they look for individuality. Exciting, new products are constantly needed in order to attract consumers, and many of these may pander to low taste. However, this is a vast improvement on the aridity and stereotyped products of the officially controlled system. People have taken to the

free cultural market, and in spite of bans on individual works, the more liberal trend created by commercialisation is clear.

Publishers became responsible not only for selecting writers' works, but also for packaging and design. After Wang Shuo entered into a royalty agreement with the publisher Huayi Press in 1993, the Chinese Youth publishing company signed a contract with a group of writers under the pseudonym Zhou Hong 周洪⁵³² to buy all their works. This group of writers were the authors of the popular series of books published under the series title *Warning Chinese* 警告中国人, and this was the first such case in mainland China. Since then the Chinese publishing world has progressed from buying works to 'buying authors'. This is also a sign that they are entering a new marketing phase referred to as the 'packaging era', as, for instance, in 'buying and packaging' singers and actors. Cultural works are treated as commercial products sold at auction, which is a further development in commercialisation. For example, the writer Shi Tiesheng 史铁生 sold a short story at a Shenzhen auction for 8,000 yuan in early 1990s.⁵³³ To sell a literary work is no longer something to be ashamed of, and how to conclude the best deal is now the most important consideration for writers.

Films and TV serials always entail an enormous amount of investment, and so attracting the largest possible audience and making the biggest possible profit are the main preoccupations of film and TV serial makers. Writers are all willing to 'touch electricity' 触电,⁵³⁴ by becoming involved with films and TV serials, becoming well

⁵³² Zhou Hong is the pseudonym of several editors of the literary magazine *Dangdai* 当代 (Contemporary), Qi Shuyu, *Chinese Literature and Art Under the Market Economy*, p.36

⁵³³ Qi Shuyu, *Chinese Literature and Art Under the Market Economy*, p.36

⁵³⁴ 'Touch electricity' 触电: since TV serials are called *dianshiju*, and films are called *dianying*, they are connected with 'dian' –electric, electricity, so things to do with TV serials and films are called

known more quickly and gaining much better pay. Writers can sell the copyright of their works to film and TV serial makers, and can also be screen-writers for their own works.

Writing a TV serial episode usually pays around 10,000 yuan, and if he or she is a famous writer, even higher payment is possible. Sometimes a writer can produce a complete episode in one day, which can bring him/her three months salary for ordinary people (10,000 yuan). Writers like to write a novel (长篇) rather than short stories, since there is the possibility it may be made into a TV serial with many episodes, bringing both professional status and financial benefits. This is illustrated by the case of the writer Eryuehe 二月河, who wrote a novel *Yongzheng huangdi* 雍正皇帝 (Emperor Yongzheng), which was made into a TV serial. While the serial was being broadcast, the novel sold a huge number of copies. The initial print run was 250,000 copies, but soon afterwards this was increased to 500,000 copies. The price of the three volume set was 70 yuan, so this also brought big profits for the publisher Changjiang Literature and Art 长江文艺. The publisher, considering the interests of the writer, suggested changing the original contract from the 'one-off manuscript fee' system (稿费制 gaofei zhi) to the royalty system (版税制 banshui zhi). Calculated according to the usual 10% royalty level, Eryuehe would receive 3.5 million yuan from the publication of just one novel, and in addition, the *Emperor Yongzheng* TV serial was sold on the East Asian market, to be broadcast on Hong Kong and Taiwan TV stations. Eryuehe still holds the copyright of the book in Taiwan and Hong Kong

'touching electricity'. The word 'chudian' usually means to get an electric shock, which may suggest that its new use implies some danger; here the word denotes potential big gains while playing a dangerous game.

as well, promising even greater payments.⁵³⁵ Although the 'novel craze' has been criticised in the literary world because some of these novels are excessively long and of very poor quality, however the annual publication level of novels is still growing rapidly, increasing from 500 in the 1980s to over 1000 in the late 1990s.

The royalty system was copied from the West; it is based on sales not print run. The former emphasis on wordage, the basis for payment, has changed to one on sales, and hence promotion. In order to try and make more money, some writers have asked for additional conditions, such as the right to decide on the number of copies printed in the first printing, e.g. 50,000 or 80,000 copies. This is often not realistic, and does not reflect international publishing practice, which is to let the publisher decide on the market for a work. Writers and publishers now have a much greater level of common interest. If the market response is good, the publisher will take greater cognisance of the writers' interests in order to maintain long-term cooperation. For example, Wang Anyi's novel *Changhen ge* 长恨歌 (Song of Eternal Regret) was originally contracted on the manuscript payment system, but because the book sold so well, the publisher gave Wang Anyi supplements over and above the contract.⁵³⁶ The royalty is negotiated between the writer and the publisher; usually for well-known writers royalties will not be less than 10% of the volume price. Details of the payment system are now much more negotiable, according to the likely profit levels. It is up to writers to shop around for the best deal.

⁵³⁵ Zhou Zhixing 周志星, 'Zhongguo zuojia you duo fu' 中国作家有多富 (How Rich Are Chinese Writers?), *Jinri mingliu* 今日名流 (Today's Celebrities), 2001, vol.1, pp.46-47

⁵³⁶ Mu Zhai 木斋, *Talking With Chinese Writers*, p.208

Publishing one book can now turn a writer into a millionaire, something nobody would have believed at the beginning of the economic reform period. For example, the well-known writer Yu Qiuyu's 余秋雨 book, *Shuang leng chang he* 霜冷长河 (Cold Fog Long River), has sold half a million copies. The price of each copy is more than 20 yuan; at a 10% royalty, the writer's earnings are more than 1 million yuan. In addition, Yu Qiuyu has produced collections of essays which have also all sold very well, including *Wenhua ku lu* 文化苦旅 (The Bitter Road to Culture), *Qian nian yi tan* 千年一叹 (A Sigh of A Thousand Years), *Shan ju biji* 山居笔记 (Notes On Living In the Mountains). Yu Qiuyu is therefore one of the richest writers of recent years in China. Wang Shuo's novel *It Looks Beautiful* sold 400,000 copies, at a cover price of 23 yuan. Huayi Press gives Wang Shuo a 12% royalty, hence Wang's income from this book is over a million yuan.⁵³⁷ Although writers have to pay tax on their income, this is still a huge amount to earn from the sales of one book. At the same time, the publishers too have achieved financial success by publishing these books. Publishing the books of Yu Qiuyu, Wang Shuo, Jia Pingwa and other popular writers is 'like printing money'.⁵³⁸

Of course the content and the style of the book, and the publicity carried out by the publishing house are important, but the fame of the author has assumed a much more significant role in the market. Contemporary well-known writers such as Wang Shuo adopt a brand strategy by using their name to create a brand in the cultural market. Wang Shuo's price for writing for newspapers and magazines is 5 yuan for every word he writes, so for a two thousand word article he will be paid 10,000 yuan. Jia

⁵³⁷ Zhou Zhixing, 'How Rich Are Chinese Writers?', *Today's Celebrities*, 2001, vol.1, pp.46-47

⁵³⁸ *ibid.*

Pingwa wrote a column for the Guangdong magazine *Jiating* 家庭 (Family), and was paid a flat fee of 3,000 yuan for each article.⁵³⁹

Current Problems

Famous popular writers are in the minority; the majority of writers are not so lucky, and can usually only receive 30-40 yuan per thousand words for collections of their stories, as in the case of Liang Xiaosheng. This fee increases from 30 yuan to 40-60 yuan per thousand words in literary magazines and publications, such as *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 (People's Literature). Some magazines, such as *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest) and *Shiyue* 十月 (October), pay according to the quality of the work; however, none of them exceed a hundred yuan per thousand words. In contrast to the booming market in popular books, the distribution figures of literary magazines have dropped to their lowest point in history: sales of major literary magazines are now only 5000 copies per issue, a huge drop from the tens of thousands of copies in the 1980s.⁵⁴⁰ Apart from academic staff at universities and research institutes who have research funding which can be used to publish their works, many people have to pay a publisher the whole printing cost in order to publish a low volume (from 100 to 1,000 copies) work. Even some academic staff are obliged to do this in order to meet the publication target their post requires. This is also necessary in order to secure their jobs and improve professional status; for example, if a lecturer wants to be promoted to the position of associate professor or professor. For some unknown writers, the dream of pursuing a writing career can become a nightmare. For example, one writer

⁵³⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁴⁰ Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, 'Wufa shenhua de ziwo yu xianshi' 无法深化的自我与现实 (Self and Reality Cannot Be Deepened), *Henan daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 河南大学学报 (社会科学版) (Journal of Henan University (Social Sciences)), May 2002, vol. 42, No.3, pp.17-19

wrote a novel and paid a publisher to publish it. He received nothing from the publisher apart from 4,000 copies of the novel, and he had to try and sell these copies himself to repay the money he borrowed. He joked about his situation, describing it as 'zi zuo zi shou' 自作自售 (home production and sale), but also echoing the old saying 'zi zuo zi shou' 自作自受, meaning 'to suffer from ones own actions'.⁵⁴¹ This situation is common among unknown freelance writers. Some choose to write 'vulgar' stories, such as 'station literature' 车站文学 (chezhan wenxue), including sensational works full of sex and violence, which are sold to travellers at train and coach stations.

Mass culture has become the biggest ever money-making machine in China. To begin with, in the process of commercialisation, it had a rebellious image, but its long term effect has been to challenge the 'pure' literary and academic works of the elite culture. Elite culture now exists mainly in universities, government research institutes and small cultural groups, and in the traditional Chinese arts field, including Peking Opera and folk music. All of these are in crisis facing a struggle for survival. Popular products dominate the market, and the trend to devalue elite culture is growing under the dominant market economy. There is little examination of the issue of the relationship between popular culture and elite culture. The positive effect that they could have on each other is not commonly admitted, and they both refuse to acknowledge the good points of the other. Academics in the elite culture, such as Wang Yichuan 王一川 and Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, have no intention of making their works more accessible to the public. In fact the language used by academics is difficult to understand because of technical terminology, demonstrating the gap

⁵⁴¹ Mu Zhai, *Talking with Chinese Writers*, p.211

between them and ordinary people. To disseminate their knowledge to ordinary people has not been considered as their mission.

Nor has popular culture been able to learn from elite culture in order to produce good quality products. The quality of some of the films is so poor that the audience has no choice but to watch Hollywood films.⁵⁴² Popular works do not have to be ephemeral and poor in quality. We can contrast this with the way popular books from Hong Kong and Taiwan have occupied the biggest share of the mainland market for the past twenty years. For example, the martial arts stories of Jin Yong 金庸, Gu Long 古龙 and Liang Yusheng 梁羽生, the romantic fiction of Chiung Yao 琼瑶, and the essays of San Mao 三毛 are books that all Chinese teenagers grow up with. There is no comparable mainland Chinese writer of popular books, not even Wang Shuo. In recent years, Western popular cultural products have appeared in the Chinese market, especially the children's market, including the *Harry Potter* series and *The Lord of the Rings*, which, together with their film versions, have been extremely popular among Chinese children. The film *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* made 45 million yuan at the box office in China. After the film was first shown on 24th Jan. 2003, 1 million franchised products were sold, and the *Harry Potter* series of books, for which Chinese Youth Publishing had the rights, were sold out at the annual book exhibition. After the first day of showing the film in the cinemas the book had to be urgently reprinted. Only two weeks later, all three books in the *Harry Potter* series were sold

⁵⁴² Even most Chinese film academics appreciate Hollywood films; this is different to the attitude of film academics in other countries. Dai Jinhua's talk at University of Durham on 30/10/2002

out; *Harry Potter* postcards and posters were already unobtainable in the coastal cities.⁵⁴³ *The Lord of the Rings* had sold 200,000 sets by April 2002.⁵⁴⁴

Chinese popular culture is as yet unable to create products with Chinese cultural characteristics, it can only manage to go with the fashion trends, rather than finding its own direction. Making the greatest amount of profit in the shortest space of time is still the major pursuit of the mass culture world. There is a lack of engagement between the world of the academic critic and the mass culture market. There are few useful criticisms of mass culture made by the academic world, rendering it even harder for mass culture products to improve in quality to the point where these products can become durable works, as is the case with the classic novels such as *San guo yanyi* 三国演义 (The Three Kingdoms). This remains just a dream for contemporary popular culture, though writers and publishers are working hard, hoping that their books will remain popular for a few years, yet even that is a tough target.

The way commercialised society has developed has shown that Wang Shuo's attitude towards the 'worship of money' as flaunted through the media has considerable merit at a practical level, although it has been severely criticised by intellectuals. There are works by other writers, which may be better than those of Wang Shuo; however none of them has enjoyed the high profile of Wang Shuo. He has promoted his lifestyle among the masses, and turned himself into a successful model for people to imitate, to

⁵⁴³ Zhou Jun 周君, 'Hali Bote xilie shu, zhu da wuzhong wuqi' 哈利·波特系列书, 主打五种武器 (The Harry Potter Series: The Five Main Types of Weapon), *Beijing yule xinbao* 北京娱乐信报 (Beijing Entertainment and Information Newspaper), 19/02/2003 quoted from Dongfang yule 东方娱乐 (Oriental Entertainment) <http://enjoy.eastday.com/epublish/gb/paper190/4/class0.../hwz1007853.htm>

⁵⁴⁴ Zhang Jun 张鉴 & Wan Jing 万静, 'Ruqi shouying zhanlu guanmang, 'Zhihuanwang' you wang xianqi guanying kuangchao' 如期首映崭露光芒, <指环王>有望掀起观影狂潮 (Opening with the expected brilliance, *The Lord of the Rings* Has Prospects of Whipping up a Flood of Film-goers), quoted from Xinlang wang 新浪网 (Sina.com) <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/f/2002-04-12/79352.html>, 12/04/2002

envy, to criticise and to analyse in the process of the commercialisation of the publishing market. Will Wang Shuo prove to be a durable mass culture proponent, and can he continue to contribute to the evolution of the publishing market?

Martial arts stories were banned in Taiwan in the 1960s, including Jin Yong's stories; they were treated as poisonous propaganda.⁵⁴⁶ The ban was ended in the 1970s, after which his stories became very popular there. On mainland China, his martial arts stories have been popular since they were allowed to be distributed at the beginning of the 1980s. There was an enormous reaction, both in Taiwan and on mainland China, after the ban was ended. Jin Yong's martial arts stories have been welcomed in other East Asian countries, including Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan; they are also very popular among overseas Chinese around the world. Some of them have been translated into Japanese, English, Korean, Vietnamese, and so on.

There is a wide range of readers of Jin Yong's martial arts stories, from scientists, intellectuals, university professors and students to ordinary people. His martial arts novels transcend political ideology, something appreciated by both the CCP leader Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 and the KMT leader Jiang Jingguo 蒋经国.⁵⁴⁷ The sales volume of his martial arts stories is huge; for example the revised version of *Tian long ba bu* 天龙八部 (Eight Sections of the Dragon of the Sky) has been reprinted 2124 times, and *Lu ding ji* 鹿鼎记 (The Story of the Deer Tripod) had been reprinted 2020 times up to 1999. Every novel has been reprinted on average more than 1000 times.⁵⁴⁸ There are also millions of illegal copies sold on the street.

⁵⁴⁶ Zhang Feng 张峰 (ed.), *Wang Shuo tiaozhan Jin Yong* 王朔挑战金庸 (Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong), Guangzhou: Guangzhou chubanshe, 1999, p.20. It was because of the Left wing image of *Da gong bao* 大公报 where Jin Yong worked, that Jin Yong's martial arts novels were banned in Taiwan.

⁵⁴⁷ Yan Jiayan 严家炎, *Jin Yong xiaoshuo lun gao* 金庸小说论稿 (Articles on Jin Yong's Novels), Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999, pp.11-12

⁵⁴⁸ 'Jin daxia jianghu fengyunlu' 金大侠江湖风云录 (Record of Master Jin's Changeable Situation in the World), *Beijing qingnian bao* 北京青年报 Beijing Youth, 07/11/1999, p9, quoted from www.bjyouth.com.cn/Bqb/19991107/GB/4059%5ED1107B0910.htm

Jin Yong's martial arts stories have become an inexhaustible resource in the mass culture field. Many of his novels, such as *She diao yingxiong zhuan* 射雕英雄传 (The Hero who Shot the Vulture) have been made into more than one TV serial in Hong Kong, and have been broadcast on the mainland as well. Apart from the novels themselves various sorts of Jin Yong related products have flooded on to the cultural market and become popular in East Asia and the Chinese-speaking world. These include colourful cartoon cards for children, and many computer game versions.

In 1999, a TV serial based on Jin Yong's *Eight Sections of the Dragon of the Sky* was broadcast by 18 satellite TV stations and 15 provincial TV stations over the Spring Festival in China.⁵⁴⁹ As a symbolic gesture, and for the good publicity, Jin Yong sold his novel *Xiao ao jianghu* 笑傲江湖 (Smile Bravely Facing the World) for just one yuan to Chinese Central Television (CCTV) to make into a TV serial. This first mainland TV production of one of Jin Yong stories was directed by Huang Jianzhong 黄健中. At the same time, Hong Kong Cable Television Station bought the same story to make into a TV serial, and every episode cost them HK\$500, 000.⁵⁵⁰

A Taiwanese company and a Singapore TV station were also both simultaneously making their own versions of *Smile Bravely Facing the Wide World* on the

⁵⁴⁹ Zeng Qingrui 曾庆瑞 & Zhao Xiaqiu 赵遐秋, 'Jin Yong xiaoshuo zhen de shi 'ling yi chang wenxue geming' ma?' 金庸小说真的是 '另一场文学革命' 吗? (Are Jin Yong's Novels Really 'Another Literary Revolution'?), *Wenyi lilun yu piping* 文艺理论与批评 (Literature and Art Theory and Criticism), 2000, vol. 4, pp.20-26

⁵⁵⁰ Cai Fanghua 蔡方华, 'Xiao ao jianghu' xu shi dai fa' <笑傲江湖>蓄势待发 (*Smile Bravely Facing the Wide World* is Storing Energy and Preparing to Start), *Beijing qingnian bao* 北京青年报 (Beijing Youth) 28/10/1999, p.8

mainland.⁵⁵¹ Before the mainland version of *Smile Bravely Facing the Wide World* had started shooting, Hong Kong Cable Television Station had already bought the broadcasting rights for \$15000 per episode.⁵⁵² Jin Yong said the price of mainland TV serials rights for his stories would be enormously increased. The prices for Jin Yong's products reached levels regarded as unbelievable, much higher than any other Chinese writer in history.

High Praise in the Academic World

In the 1980s, Jin Yong's novels were looked down on by intellectuals, and ignored by most academics. However, since the mid-1990s, the Chinese authorities and academics have totally changed their views on Jin Yong and his works. He has received many honours in both the political and academic fields. He met the CCP leader Deng Xiaoping in 1981 and president Jiang Zemin in 1993 in mainland China, and met the KMT leader Jiang Jingguo in 1973 on Taiwan. He frequently voices his political criticisms in *Mingbao* 明报 (Ming Newspaper), and enjoys high political status in mainland China and Hong Kong, being a member of Political Consultative Conference of China 政协委员.

Jin Yong gained an honorary professorship of Beijing University in October 1994, starting the first Jin Yong wave in the academic world. The critic Yan Lieshan 鄢烈山 published his article 'Jujue Jin Yong' 拒绝金庸 (Rejecting Jin Yong) on the 2nd Dec.

⁵⁵¹ 'San jia tong pai 'Xiao ao jianghu'' 三家同拍<笑傲江湖> (*Smile Bravely Facing the Wide World* Being Shot by Three Companies at the Same Time), 22/11/1999 quoted from Chinese Central Television 中央电视台网站, <http://www.cctv.com/news/text/518859.html>

⁵⁵² "'Xiao ao jianghu' yuan he ruci zhiqian' <<笑傲江湖>缘何如此值钱?> (Why is *Smile Bravely Facing the Wide World* worth so much money?), *Guangzhou ribao* 广州日报 (Guangzhou Daily), 6/7/2000

1994 in *Nanfang zhoumo* 南方周末 (Southern Weekend). He criticised 'Beijing University for degrading its own status by encouraging this poor taste', and criticised Jin Yong from the historical, value and entertainment aspects.⁵⁵³ The criticism was ignored, and Zhejiang University invited Jin Yong to be dean of the School of Literature in 1998. He was later invited as honorary professor by many universities.⁵⁵⁴

Another wave in the academic world was in 1995. A professor of Beijing Normal University, Wang Yichuan 王一川, and his PhD students selected Jin Yong as number four among nine twentieth century Chinese literary masters for their book series. The nine were Lu Xun, Shen Congwen, Ba Jin, Jin Yong, Lao She, Yu Dafu, Wang Meng, Zhang Ailing and Jia Pingwa.⁵⁵⁵ They replaced the famous writer Mao Dun with Jin Yong. They claimed that they wanted to rid literature of political influence, and put literary considerations to the fore. Their explanation was that Mao Dun's works were flawed by 'putting the theme first' (zhuti xianxing). It is not clear what criteria were used and how the order was arrived at; there seemed to be no rationale.⁵⁵⁶ If popularity were the reason, there are many other popular novelists, such as Zhang Henshui and Chiung Yao. It was suspected of being a marketing exercise.⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵³ Zhang Feng 张峰 (ed.), *Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong*, p193. (北大自贬身份而媚俗)

⁵⁵⁴ Jin Yong was a visitor at Oxford University in 1992, where he gave some lectures. Jin Yong was awarded an honorary PhD degree by Cambridge University in June 2005

⁵⁵⁵ Wang Yichuan 王一川, 'Wo xuan ershi shiji Zhongguo xiaoshuo dashi' 我选二十世纪中国小说大师 (I Select Twentieth Century Chinese Masters of Fiction), *Xi'an jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* 西安教育学院学报 (Xi'an Education Institute Journal), 1995, vol. 3, pp.41-44. (鲁迅, 沈从文, 巴金, 金庸, 老舍, 郁达夫, 王蒙, 张爱玲, 贾平凹)

⁵⁵⁶ Li Qingxi 李庆西, 'Zuojia de pai zuoci' 作家的排座次 (Running Order of Writers), *Wenyi pinglun* 文艺评论 (Literature and Art Criticism), 1995, vol. 1, pp.82-83

⁵⁵⁷ Liao Kebin 廖可斌 (ed.), *Jin Yong xiaoshuo lunzheng ji* 金庸小说论争集 (Collected Debates on Jin Yong's Fiction), Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2000. p.52

Wang Yichuan claimed that Jin Yong's stories are a modern restructuring of the spirit of classical Chinese culture, and explored a new level and cultural field for Chinese martial arts. He thinks Jin Yong's martial arts stories enriched Chinese fiction, and he used Jin Yong's stories to bridge the gap between 'refined' (ya) and 'vulgar' (su) literature.⁵⁵⁸

This attempt to overturn the accepted literary canon shocked the literary world. It was a part of a movement to rewrite modern literary history, a gesture opposing the direct interference of political ideology in literature. It aimed to adopt purely artistic criteria to evaluate works, and was the beginning of a rejection of official evaluation. Jin Yong's martial arts fiction became a tool in the movement to rewrite China's cultural history.

The international academic study of Jin Yong's fiction started in the late 1990s. In May 1998, an international conference on 'Jin Yong's Fiction and Twentieth Century Chinese Literature' was held by Colorado University in the USA.⁵⁵⁹ The same year, two other symposia on 'Jin Yong studies' were held in mainland China and Taiwan. Jin Yong's stories were becoming a research topic for PhD theses.⁵⁶⁰ Some universities, such as Zhejiang University, Shenzhen University and Guangdong Academy of Social Science set up Jin Yong research centres.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁸ Wang Yichuan 王一川 (ed.), 'Xu' 序 (Introduction), *Ershi shiji Zhongguo wenxue dashi wenku* 20 世纪中国文学大师文库 (Masters of 20th Century Chinese Literature Collection), Hainan: Hainan chubanshe, 1994.

⁵⁵⁹ Yan Jiayan 严家炎, *Jin Yong xiaoshuo lungao* 金庸小说论稿 (Articles on Jin Yong's Novels), Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999

⁵⁶⁰ Beijing University Chinese Department student Song Jiewei's 宋杰伟 PhD thesis of 1998 was published as a book in 1999, *Cong yule xingwei dao wutuobang chongdong—Jin Yong xiaoshuo zai jiedu* 从娱乐行为到乌托邦冲动—金庸小说再解读 (From Entertaining Behaviour to Utopian Excitement—A Re-analysis of Jin Yong's Fiction), Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1999

⁵⁶¹ Yan Huo 严火, 'Guanyu Jin Yong' 关于金庸 (About Jin Yong), *Zhonghua wenzhai* 中华文摘 (Chinese Abstracts), 2000, vol.4, p.58

Two leading figures in the movement to praise Jin Yong's martial art fiction were Yan Jiayan and Feng Qiyong. Beijing University professor Yan Jiayan described the novels as having mystical imagination, fascinating plots with fine style and profound thought.⁵⁶² He believes they contain rich traditional cultural content, are of high academic quality, and their inclusion in the literary canon is 'a literary revolution'. 'Jin Yong's martial arts novels are a miracle of twentieth century Chinese culture; it is a splendid chapter in literary history'.⁵⁶³

The Chairman of the 'Hong xuehui' 红学会 (The Dream of the Red Chamber Study Association) Feng Qiyong 冯其庸 made a similarly high evaluation of Jin Yong and his stories. He said: 'Jin Yong is a first class major novelist. His discovery is like a curious peak which has suddenly risen up; his works will always be a part of the spiritual wealth of our nation.'⁵⁶⁴ Feng Qiyong thinks that 'the structure of Jin Yong's stories has reached an historical peak of perfection',⁵⁶⁵ and that it was reasonable to establish 'Jin xue' 金学 (Jin Yong studies) as a field.⁵⁶⁶ These and similar comments are clear claims for canonical status.

Jin Yong's attitude toward his own works was much more diffident. He said in 1969: 'Although martial arts fiction has some flavour of literature, basically it is still

⁵⁶² Yan Jiayan, *Articles on Jin Yong's Stories*, p.209

⁵⁶³ *ibid*, p.213

⁵⁶⁴ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong's Fiction*, pp.83-84

⁵⁶⁵ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong's Fiction* p84-85

⁵⁶⁶ Feng Qiyong 冯其庸, 'Du Jin Yong' 读金庸 (Reading Jin Yong), *Zhongguo* 中国 (China), 1986, vol.8, quoted from Ding Jin 丁进 (ed.), *Zhongguo dalu Jin-Yong-Yanjiu lunzhu-mulu* 中国大陆金庸研究论著目录 (1985-1999) (Index of Articles on Jin Yong Study in Mainland China 1985-1999), 'Jin xue' puts Jin Yong's martial arts fiction on a par with *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the study of which is called 'Hong xue' 红学. *Wenhua jiaoyu ziliao* 文化教育资料 (Data on Culture and Education), 2000, vol. 6, pp.116-131

entertainment material; it is better not to compare this with formal literature.’⁵⁶⁷ Jin Yong talked again about his martial art works at the 1998 ‘Jin Yong Fiction and Twentieth Century Chinese Literature’ international symposium held at Colorado University in the USA. He said his stories were: ‘prosaic in content, with no profound meaning, and not worth having many academics study it. If people are talking about ‘Jin Yong studies’, I do not deserve it.’⁵⁶⁸ He felt that his stories had met his original aim in writing, which was to entertain people and gain more readers for his newspaper. Jin Yong also said: ‘Martial arts fiction is only one form of literature; it is not necessary to overestimate its worth, because this will have a bad influence.’⁵⁶⁹ The media and critics treated this as great modesty, and praised Jin Yong even more.

Wang Shuo’s Criticism of Jin Yong

Wang Shuo published ‘Wo kan Jin Yong’ 我看金庸 (Jin Yong in My Eyes) in *Zhongguo qingnian bao* 中国青年报 (Chinese Youth) on 1st November 1999. Wang Shuo’s three thousand word article is not an academic article, nor is it a theoretical analysis of Jin Yong’s works. The essay is more like Wang Shuo’s subjective personal review as an ordinary reader. However the essay was more influential and controversial than academic articles, and caused a great debate across the country.

Wang Shuo’s article was commissioned by the editor of *Chinese Youth*, who suggested that the literary world needed a strong voice, and he wished to spark a widespread debate and restore the prestige of literature. Jin Yong was already an idol,

⁵⁶⁷ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong’s Fiction*, pp.83-84

⁵⁶⁸ *ibid*, pp.83-84

⁵⁶⁹ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong’s Fiction*, p.18

and Wang Shuo was 'a heavy-weight figure with special characteristics'.⁵⁷⁰ Wang Shuo was always ready to express controversial views on culture, which would generate debate. A previous example was the national 'humanism' debate of 1993-1995. Wang Shuo and the media have a record as co-conspirators,⁵⁷¹ a fact admitted by Wang Shuo and proved in this case.

Wang Shuo's article is written in a particularly challenging way. It is not that he denies the value of Jin Yong's martial arts fiction and its great success in cultural market. He knows that:

'We lack professional writers like Chiung Yao and Jin Yong, with that kind of specialised expertise in one field.'⁵⁷²

However, the overheated market and the millions of fans are the commercialised reality. This together with the excessive praise of the official media and academics were a real cause for concern, and the situation had reached such a level that Wang Shuo thought Jin Yong had become a kind of 'power' 势力 (shili)⁵⁷³ drowning out dissident voices:

'Jin Yong is an influential writer; it is not normal to have a unanimous reaction towards him'.⁵⁷⁴

Wang Shuo criticises the content of Jin Yong's stories as 'using the name of morality to kill people, propagating sex and violence under the pretence of promoting the

⁵⁷⁰ Ning Zongyi 宁宗一, 'Wang Shuo ping Jin Yong yinfa de sikao' 王朔评金庸引发的思考 (The Thinking Behind Wang Shuo's Criticism of Jin Yong), *Yinshan xuekan* 阴山学刊 (Yinshan Journal), 2000, vol. 13, No. 2 pp.56-59

⁵⁷¹ Wang Shuo, 'Wo kan Wang Shuo' 我看王朔 (Wang Shuo in My Eyes), *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.58

⁵⁷² Wang Shuo, 'Wo kan dazhong wenhua Gang Tai wenhua ji qita' 我看大众文化港台文化及其他 (Popular Culture, Hong Kong and Taiwan Culture and Other Things in My Eyes), *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.26

⁵⁷³ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong's Fiction*, p.16

⁵⁷⁴ Zhang Feng (ed.), *Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong*, p.35

law.’⁵⁷⁵ Wang Shuo criticises chivalrous figures as criminals rather than heroes or martial arts masters, because they kill each other for private gratification, often in the name of patriotism. In the quest for so-called justice they do not care about how many people end up dead. This is a decadent view of human society and not ‘rich traditional cultural content’ and ‘spiritual wealth of our nation’; it should not be praised to the skies.

Wang Shuo criticised Jin Yong’s works as having ‘repetitive plots, and long-winded writing’. The characters are always fighting when they meet, and Wang Shuo questioned why: ‘All the characters in the stories have huge hatred, and the whole story is pushed by it. What new thing is there?’⁵⁷⁶ Wang Shuo posed many questions representing a strong challenge to people who praised these stories.

In criticising the depiction of characters, Wang Shuo said:

‘Whatever disposition the characters have at the beginning, later on they are always the same, straight up and down like herding pigs in small alley. The decent and the evil all become worshippers of Buddha in the end.’⁵⁷⁷

The chivalrous characters in Jin Yong’s stories expected by critics to bring heroism to common people are criticised as ‘caricatures’.

Wang Shuo did not believe that the humanity of those characters had anything in common with real human beings;⁵⁷⁸ they are different from normal people:

‘Reading his (Jin Yong’s) book, I did not have any images of people and groups of people; it is like looking at a pile of robots acting. While I was

⁵⁷⁵ Wang Shuo, ‘Jin Yong in My Eyes’, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.76

⁵⁷⁶ *ibid*, p.74

⁵⁷⁷ *ibid*, p.75

⁵⁷⁸ Wang Shuo, ‘Jin Yong in My Eyes’, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.76

reading I asked myself: Is this possible? This person writes without using his brain!'⁵⁷⁹

The characters in Jin Yong's novels have are not real people but super-humans, able to fly, and fight in the air. His fiction offers heroes from children's dreams, with adult plots; this is an insidious mixture, a 'culture snake'.

Jin Yong is demoted from his position as a 'top class major novelist' by Wang Shuo.

Jin Yong employs a half classical, half modern version of Chinese which is a typical 'baihuawen' 白话文 (modern language) from the May 4th 1919 period. People praise Jin Yong's language as an attractive classical style. Wang Shuo totally disagrees with this, and thinks Jin Yong uses a 'dead language' to write in, far from having a 'language talent which surpasses others'. For Wang Shuo he is not as good as Shi Nai'an 施耐庵 (1297?-1370?)⁵⁸⁰ who preceded him, nor Jia Pingwa 贾平凹 who followed him.⁵⁸¹ Jin Yong's language appears very attractive to mainland readers who are not familiar with that language style, but this is because in the political decades an officially sanctioned Putonghua ('common language') had obliterated the earlier classically influenced style.

Wang Shuo also opposed people's comments about Jin Yong's language having a sense of pace. He said:

'What sense of pace? All the sentences are stereotyped expressions, two or three lines of dialogue then a fight. This use of concentrated action scenes means you ignore the language, or can say the language is all irrelevant, it is only used for setting the scene.'⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.77

⁵⁸⁰ Shi Nai'an 施耐庵 (1297?-1370?) is the author of the classic novel *Shui hu zhuan* 水浒传 (The Water Margin)

⁵⁸¹ Wang Shuo, 'Jin Yong in My Eyes', *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.76

⁵⁸² *ibid.*, p.75

The fact that Jin Yong's language describes martial arts movements does not mean that it has a sense of pace.

Wang Shuo also attacks the shortcomings of the martial arts genre. Martial arts fiction should be treated as just one of many literary genres rather than extravagantly praised. Martial arts stories usually follow a stereotyped model of fighting, killing, ganging up, suffering insults and gaining revenge. Wang Shuo's article presents his opinions in an amusing language which ordinary people can understand; it is not the systematic analysis but abstruse style of academics written for a highly restricted readership. The scholar He Manzi 何满子⁵⁸³ and the Chinese Social Science Academy Literature Department researcher Yuan Liangjun 袁良骏⁵⁸⁴ were two representatives of the few academics who were critical of Jin Yong. Their articles were serious academic criticism, based on a rigorous but measured approach, but these had not been noticed. Once Wang Shuo's article had started a widespread debate about Jin Yong's stories, then He Manzi and Yuan Liangjun's articles were selected for inclusion in the book of selected articles on the debate.

He Manzi thinks that no matter how many different ways there are of writing of martial art stories, 'essentially they embody and propagate the illusion that help was on hand for helpless people in the old society.' He thinks it is 'opium of the mind',

⁵⁸³ He Manzi's 何满子 first article was: 'Wei wuxia xiaoshuo liangdi' 为武侠小说亮底 (Casting Light on Martial Arts Fiction), *Wenhui bao* 文汇报 (Wenhui Daily) on 23rd June 1999; the second article was: 'Wei jiu wenhua xuming de yanqing xiaoshuo yu wuxia xiaoshuo' 为旧文化续名的言情小说与武侠小说 (Love Stories and Martial Arts Stories Propagating Old Culture), *Guangming ribao* 光明日报 (Guangming Daily) on 12th August 1999; the third article was: 'Po 'xin wuxia xiaoshuo' zhi xin' 破 '新武侠小说' 之新 (Denouncing the 'New' in New Martial Art Stories) in *Guangming Daily*, 1st December, 1999

⁵⁸⁴ Yuan Liangjun 袁良骏, 'Zai shuo yasu—yi Jin Yong wei li' 再说雅俗—以金庸小说为例 (Talking Again about Refined and Vulgar—Jin Yong's Stories as an Example) *Zhonghua dushu bao* 中华读书报 (Chinese Studies) on 10th November, 1999.

and just the opposite of liberating people's thinking and waking them up.⁵⁸⁵ He Manzi thinks that martial arts epitomises the old social system: society ruled by men (rather than the law), and no science nor democracy to inform people's consciousness and customs. This was the reason martial art works were castigated in the May 4th Movement: they represented old values where New Literature represented new values. The pleasure which martial art works produced was a superficial and insidious one.⁵⁸⁶

Yuan Liangjun pointed out that Jin Yong's novels failed to break free from the vices of the old, decadent martial art stories. This limited Jin Yong's development of his talent, prevented him from totally getting rid of the chronic ailments of the old martial arts stories, leaving them flawed by vulgarity and inferiority. Yuan Liangjun criticised Jin Yong from six aspects: stereotyped structures; escapism from real life; too much fighting and killing; mixing fiction with real history, confusing readers over what is true and what is false; repetitiveness, especially in martial arts descriptions; deleterious effect on society of descriptions of bullying, killing and fighting. Yuan Liangjun thinks that this decadent literary genre is a relic of the past and has no place in contemporary culture.⁵⁸⁷

Jin Yong's martial arts novels have inherited the characteristics of 1930s martial arts stories; they are the best of current martial arts fiction, eclipsing writers such as Liang Yusheng 梁羽生 and Gu Long 古龙. Jin Yong was also able to take advantage of his status as a newspaper owner and political critic with an active social and political life to promote his novels.

⁵⁸⁵ Zhang Feng (ed.), *Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong*, p.59

⁵⁸⁶ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong's Fiction*, p.41

⁵⁸⁷ Zhang Feng (ed.), *Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong*, pp.65-69

Jin Yong created a romantic world of traditional chivalry catering to people's need for escape from the chaotic, incomprehensible and pressurised existence of real life. Jin Yong gave people allies in their unequal fight against injustice in their own lives, and beauty and hope in the love stories built into his martial art stories. He talks about traditional poetry, lute playing, Chinese chess, calligraphy and painting, creating an aspirational environment for his readers, and a channel linking them with traditional culture. He purposefully keeps his language simple, allowing those of modest educational attainments to enjoy reading his stories. Jin Yong's stories are an accomplished version of popular fiction, deeply steeped in commercial culture. The reason Jin Yong's novels are so popular is that they allow people to switch off, 'give their brain a rest' (停停脑子) and indulge in an entertaining pastime.

In mainland China scholars like He Manzi and Yuan Liangjun went against the prevailing trend, and suggested people should change their perspective in studying Jin Yong.⁵⁸⁸ Jin Yong was a 'master who has been raised too high',⁵⁸⁹ and scholars like Yan Jiayan and Feng Qiyong needed to take a calmer and more critical look at their subject.

It was not only the mainland where scholars had gone overboard in their praise; this was also the situation in Taiwan. There were very few real criticisms. Tamkang University 淡江大学 scholar Lin Baochun 林保淳 said there have been more than 300 books and articles commenting on Jin Yong's stories since 1979 in Taiwan. However, 'generally, although these studies can be said 'not to lack creative ideas' but

⁵⁸⁸ Zhang Feng (ed.), *Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong*, p.60 & p.69

⁵⁸⁹ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong's Fiction*, pp.76-81

relatively few are 'critical' and 'professional', while some adopt the flavour of a 'fan club'. He said:

'Of the various kinds of articles, not one in ten is critical of Jin Yong. Occasionally there are articles which are slightly critical, but the praise and criticism are far away from each other, so people may not understand their real meaning. In fact, there are many shortcomings that can be pointed out in Jin Yong's works, and Jin Yong himself is not above debate either, but one rarely sees the critics mention this.'⁵⁹⁰

In Chinese tradition, people like to listen to praise and cannot stand criticism; this is accepted to be part of the national character 国民性. It has been criticised by the Taiwan critic Bo Yang 柏杨 in his book *Choulou de Zhongguoren* 丑陋的中国人 (Ugly Chinese),⁵⁹¹ a work banned soon after it was published in mainland China. This is very true of the academic field where it is difficult to have a real critical atmosphere.

Wang Shuo is an exception to the norm in this; he is always the challenging and controversial figure who stirs up the argument. For Wang Shuo there is obviously a problem with Jin Yong's martial arts stories:

'Literature has a question of 'ecological balance' (shengtai pingheng), if there are people say he is good, there will be people who say he is not good. Writing sharply is my 'writing style', it does not mean that I am dissatisfied with Jin Yong, I think I was quite polite to him.'⁵⁹²

Wang Shuo's article deliberately left some 'holes' for people to criticise him to generate a debate, such as the admission that he did not even finish reading one novel. This caused people to criticise him for not having the right to speak about Jin Yong

⁵⁹⁰ 'Jin daxia jianghu fengyunlu' 金大侠江湖风云录 (Record of Master Jin's Changeable Situation in the World), *Beijing Youth*, 07/11/1999, p.9, quoted from www.bjyouth.com.cn/Bqb/19991107/GB/4059%5ED1107B0910.htm

⁵⁹¹ Bo Yang 柏杨, *Choulou de Zhongguoren* 丑陋的中国人 (Ugly Chinese), Beijing: Huacheng chubanshe, 1986

⁵⁹² Zhang Feng (ed.), *Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong*, p.34

because he had not finished reading all the novels. Wang Shuo argued that people do not have to finish the whole dish to be able to tell whether it is good or not.⁵⁹³

The Critical Debate

Many newspapers and magazines joined in the debate, partly for commercial reasons, and partly for cultural ones. The media used Wang Shuo's article to shake up a quiet literary world, and induce a period of introspection on cultural phenomena, such as the craze for Jin Yong's stories and TV serials. *Wenhui Bao* 文汇报 (Wenhui Newspaper) insisted that Jin Yong respond to Wang Shuo's criticism. He published two articles in the mainland and one article in Hong Kong during the debate. After Jin Yong responded, millions of his fans became excited.

Jin Yong has not responded to any critics who have criticised or praised him except Wang Shuo. Jin Yong felt that Wang Shuo's article was 'the first fierce attack on my novels.'⁵⁹⁴ Jin Yong's article was published on the 5th November 1999, which was the fifth day after Wang Shuo's article. There had already been many other articles published during that time.

In Jin Yong's article, he quoted guidance from Buddhism and from Mencius 孟子 to calm himself down and to be strong and tolerant. He thinks that he has unexpected praise from academics, such as Wang Yichuan, and the honorary professorship from Beijing University, etc. He thinks that Wang Shuo's criticism has placed excessive

⁵⁹³ Wang Shuo, 'Jin Yong in My Eyes', *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.75

⁵⁹⁴ Jin Yong, 'Bu yu zhi yu he qiu quan zhi hui' 不虞之誉和求全之毁 (Unexpected Praise and Excessive Censure), Zhang Feng (ed.), *Wang Shuo Challenge Jin Yong*, p.41-42

demands to him, and he does not have enough ability and talent to respond to it. Jin Yong's attitude is magnanimous and worldly-wise; he thinks Wang Shuo has already showed him mercy, just placing him among the 'four great vulgarities' 四大俗 (si da su)⁵⁹⁵, rather than the 'four great invaders' 四大寇 (si da kou) or the 'four great poisons' 四大毒 (si da du).⁵⁹⁶ He emphasized that he did not accept the criticism that he was using a 'dead language to write in',⁵⁹⁷ claiming that his language style was something he had practised hard for a long time and would not change.⁵⁹⁸ He accepted some of the criticisms from Wang Shuo and others, and he said these criticisms had 'benefited me a lot'.⁵⁹⁹ He listed a few shortcomings of his stories, such as too many coincidences in his plots, the fact that some of the content is strange and irrational, the dialogues between characters are not in the living language style, the personalities of characters stay the same from beginning to end, he glamorises old-fashioned culture, some plots and characters pander to readers, there is not enough artistry, and so on. He is not in favour of over-praising martial arts stories.

When Wang Shuo's article was published, he was in his early forties, and Jin Yong was 75 years old; they had different life experiences and cultural backgrounds. Compared with Jin Yong, Wang Shuo had not yet been accepted by official circles, and had not won any major literary award, he had no honorary titles, and was still a

⁵⁹⁵ Wang Shuo includes Jin Yong in his Hong Kong and Taiwanese 'four types of popular culture'; these include four pop stars 'si da tianwang' 四大天王 (Four Kings) (Jacky Cheung 张学友, Andy Lau 刘德华, Aaron Kwok 郭富城 and Leon Lai Ming 黎明), Jackie Chan's 成龙 films, Chiung Yao's 琼瑶 TV serials and Jin Yong's martial arts stories, which are called the 'four big vulgarities' (si da su 四大俗).

⁵⁹⁶ Zhang Feng (ed.), *Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong*, p.42

⁵⁹⁷ Wang Shuo, 'Jin Yong in My Eyes', *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.76

⁵⁹⁸ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong's Fiction*, p.12

⁵⁹⁹ *ibid*, p.12 (教益甚多)

free-lance writer. Jin Yong said he and Wang Shuo were on 'two parallel lines, which will never meet'.⁶⁰⁰

Comparing Jin Yong and Wang Shuo, Jin Yong's martial arts stories are creations belonging to an imaginary world, which provide a haven for readers away from real life: this is escapist literature. Wang Shuo's stories are reflections of problems in real life, which people have to face; this is realist literature. The argument with Wang Shuo criticising Jin Yong is also a trial of strength between two different literary concepts, which dominate the Chinese literary world.⁶⁰¹

Jin Yong uses a superficially intellectual 'noble and refined' style, such as found in traditional poetry, music, and painting, using traditional literary structures and forms in his works to satisfy people's desire for knowledge of an elegant past. Contrary to Jin Yong, Wang Shuo rarely uses these in his stories. He uses his absurdist writing style to satirize orthodox literature and art, and mainstream ideology. Wang Shuo's works are in rebellion against orthodox thought. Wang Shuo uses a superficially 'vulgar' language style to express serious ideas. Characters in Wang Shuo's stories are just ordinary people rather than martial arts masters. The works of these two reflect polar opposite literary standpoints.

Jin Yong's fans were not as tolerant as Jin Yong. Some of them were very angry at what Wang Shuo said; they tried to attack Wang Shuo, and fought with Wang Shuo's fans on the internet. Jin Yong had more fans than Wang Shuo: according to a website

⁶⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p.10

⁶⁰¹ Ge Hongbing 葛红兵, 'Wo kan Wang Shuo he Jin Yong de shijimo zhi zheng' 我看王朔和金庸的世纪末之争 (How I See the Argument between Wang Shuo and Jin Yong at the end of the Century), *Zhang'ai yu rentong* 障碍与认同 (Obstruction and Affinity), pp.112-113

survey of their relative popularity, Jin Yong gained 75% of support, and Wang Shuo 24%,⁶⁰² hence Jin Yong won an absolutely majority. We should note that the majority of internet users at the end of 1990s were university students and middle school students. Wang Shuo expressed his sympathy with Jin Yong's fans,⁶⁰³ saying: 'If there were not so many Jin Yong supporters I would not have talked about Jin Yong.'⁶⁰⁴

Wang Shuo was pursued by the media and gave many interviews to newspaper and internet reporters. Some people suspected that Wang Shuo criticised Jin Yong with a commercial motive. Wang Shuo denied this. The result of his intervention was that there was definitely less unanimity on the part of academics; some criticised Jin Yong, some criticised Wang Shuo. Many commented on the debate: some criticised the excessive praise of Jin Yong,⁶⁰⁵ some argued with academics that criticised Jin Yong.⁶⁰⁶ This led to a healthier attitude towards 'cultural idols' and criticism of them.

Some people recognised the service Wang Shuo had done in expressing honestly his feelings, something Chinese intellectuals had found difficult to do.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰² Wu Xiaoli 吴晓黎, 'Jiushi niandai wenhua zhong de yingxiong' 90年代文化中的金庸 (Jin Yong in 1990s Culture), Dai Jinhua (ed.), *Shuxie wenhua yingxiong* 书写文化英雄 (Writing about Cultural Heroes), p.152

⁶⁰³ Zhang Feng (ed.), *Wang Shuo Challenges Jin Yong*, p.32

⁶⁰⁴ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong's Fiction*, p.19

⁶⁰⁵ Zeng Qingxu 曾庆瑞 & Zhao Xiaqiu 赵遐秋, 'Jin Yong xiaoshuo zhen de shi 'ling yi chang wenxue geming' ma?' 金庸小说真的是 '另一场文学革命' 吗? (Are Jin Yong's Stories Really 'Another Literary Revolution'?), *Wenyi lilun yu piping* 文艺理论与批评 (Literature and Art Theory and Criticism), 2000, vol. 4, pp.20-26

⁶⁰⁶ Hu Guangzhou 胡光舟, 'Wei Jin Yong xiaoshuo shuo ji ju hua—jian xiang He Manzi xiansheng jin yi yan' 为金庸小说说几句话—兼向何满子先生进一言 (Saying A Few Words for Jin Yong's Novels—And Giving A Word of Advice to He Manzi), *Minzun yishu* 民族艺术 (Ethnic Arts), 2000, vol. 1, pp.63-67

⁶⁰⁷ Liu Zhenyun 刘震云 & Wang Li 王莉, 'Dui Zhongguo yingshi wenhua de yi zhong kanfa' 对中国影视文化的一种看法 (A View On Chinese Film and TV Culture), *Dianying yishu* 电影艺术 (Film Art), 2001, vol. 2, pp.79-82

A Culture in Decline

Running through criticism of Jin Yong's martial arts stories, a serious question is raised: what kind of mass culture should China have? Beijing-centred contemporary Chinese culture, including literature, film and music, in which Wang Shuo participated, started up at almost the same time as Hong Kong and Taiwanese cultural products moved into the mainland, i.e. at the beginning of the 1980s. Twenty years later, Hong Kong and Taiwanese-based capitalist commercial culture products are still at the forefront of the mainland market, almost monopolizing it. Young generations are growing up with them and being deeply influenced by them. Mainland native culture is in decline.

From the political point of view, mainland China has taken over Hong Kong, but from the cultural point of view, from the case of Jin Yong, the take-over is in the opposite direction. Hong Kong commercial culture has infiltrated the mainland authoritarian system of culture and developed a new popular culture.⁶⁰⁸

Wang Shuo shows his deep concern in his article. Mainland Chinese writers have to face ideological and psychological problems in order to get into the mass culture market. They are in a transitional stage from decades of socialist ideological control to a totally new market-orientated system. Most people in the culture field have found it very difficult to get used to the new role they should play to create a mass culture to provide for people's needs in commercialised society. As a result, mainland China

⁶⁰⁸ Liao Kebin (ed.), *Collected Debates on Jin Yong's Fiction*, p.76

lacks specialised popular professional writers who can match Jin Yong and the Taiwanese romantic novelist Chiung Yao.

Mainland China has developed very fast, not only in material goods, but also in people's attitudes. The mainland cultural world has not kept pace with these changes to deliver new products. It has left the way open for Hong Kong and Taiwanese products to take over the mainland cultural market. Their books and films were all originally produced for people in commercialised societies. Chiung Yao's love stories and Jin Yong's martial arts stories have been tested and selected by their home markets, where they have proved to be enduring products, and now have been found to suit the needs of mainland people during the last twenty years of commercialisation. There has been a real lack of interest, appreciation and research on how these popular cultural products came to dominate the mainland, and these books, films and TV serials have attracted little academic attention or concern. It seems likely that these Hong Kong and Taiwanese cultural products will still dominate the mass market for a very long time to come. Is Hong Kong and Taiwanese commercial culture the way forward for mainland culture? Can elite culture survive, as popular commercial culture develops?

II. Wang Shuo on Lu Xun

The Background to Lu Xun

Lu Xun has been accorded the highest status among 20th century Chinese literary figures, being given such epithets as: 'literary giant' 文豪, 'great writer' 伟大文学家, 'revolutionary thinker' 革命思想家, 'of the hardest bone' 骨头最硬, 'the backbone of Chinese people' 中国人的脊梁, 'banner of intellectuals' 知识分子的旗帜, 'national soul' 民族魂. These titles have never been used for any other Chinese writer. Most of these epithets are based on well-publicised praise of Lu Xun by Mao Zedong in the 1940s.⁶⁰⁹ While most works of fiction were banned during the Cultural Revolution, Lu Xun's works alone remained in the book-stores alongside Mao's works. Lu Xun's stories and articles were selected for inclusion in school textbooks, ensuring that every student in China learned them. Most school examinations included questions about Lu Xun works, greatly influencing the attitudes of successive generations.

There has been much research on Lu Xun, by the Lu Xun Research Institute and scholars throughout Chinese academia. Most of the work has been hagiographical; very few people have criticised Lu Xun. This situation has prevailed since the 1940s. Research on Lu Xun began to go through a difficult period in the fast developing

⁶⁰⁹ Mao Zedong 毛泽东 gave high praise to Lu Xun in 1940: 'Lu Hsun was the greatest and the most courageous standard-bearer of this new cultural force. The chief commander of China's cultural revolution, he was not only a great man of letters but a great thinker and revolutionary. Lu Hsun was a man of unyielding integrity, free from all sycophancy or obsequiousness; this quality is invaluable among colonial and semi-colonial people. Representing the great majority of the nation, Lu Hsun breached and stormed the enemy citadel; on the cultural front he was the bravest and most correct, the firmest, the most loyal and the most ardent national hero, a hero without parallel in our history. The road he took was the very road of China's new national culture.' *Xin minzhuzhuyi lun* 新民主主义论 (On New Democracy), *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 2, p.372, Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1965.

commercial society of the 1990s. There were fewer and fewer research papers on Lu Xun each year, and quite a few specialist journals on ‘Lu Xun studies’ closed down, including *Lu Xun xuekan* 鲁迅学刊 (Lu Xun Studies) and *Lu Xun yanjiu ziliao* 鲁迅研究资料 (Lu Xun Research Materials). People’s lives and attitudes had changed dramatically, and research on Lu Xun became less and less relevant; this was marked by a diminishing number of researchers and the problem of where research should go.

Lu Xun Research Publications⁶¹⁰

| Year | Number of Articles Published | Type of Works (Special books, magazines, articles) |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| 1981(centenary of birth) | n.a. | 123 |
| 1982 | 1880 | |
| 1983 | 1590 | |
| 1984 | 1120 | |
| 1985 | 710 | |
| 1986 (50th anniversary of death) | 550 | 65 |
| 1987 | 280 | |
| 1988 | 160 | |
| 1989 | 170 | |
| 1990 | 170 | |
| 1991(110 year anniversary of birth) | 260 | 27 |

Wang Shuo’s Criticism of Lu Xun

Wang Shuo’s article ‘Lu Xun In My Eyes’ is further evidence that the media needs Wang Shuo, and he needs the media. The literary magazine *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest) invited Wang Shuo write about Lu Xun to commemorate the 120th anniversary of his

⁶¹⁰ Duan Guochao 段国超, ‘Lu Xun yanjiu de kunjing yu chulu’ 鲁迅研究的当前困境与出路 (The Current Difficult Position and Direction of Lu Xun Study), *Weinan shizhuan xuebao (Shehui kexue)* 渭南师专学报 (社会科学版) (Journal of Weinan Normal College, Social Science), 1994, vol. 3, pp.31-38

birth. The article was written earlier than his essay 'Jin Yong In My Eyes',⁶¹¹ but published a couple of months later, in February 2000, volume 2. This essay was written in similar vein to that on Jin Yong. From criticising popular culture, Wang Shuo turned to criticising elite culture. The article on Lu Xun also caused considerable debate in the academic world.

Wang Shuo's essay was written under his principle of 'being different from others' (和别人不一样), and also coming straight out with his thoughts, which are 'not more profound than others'.⁶¹² He advocates 'criticising Lu Xun freely':

'You do not have to be right in order to be able to speak; you can say whatever you think about things, and that is all there is to it. Getting away from superstition and emancipating the mind involves acting shamelessly. This approach enabled me to assess Lu Xun through an individual's eyes.'⁶¹³

Wang Shuo's article is not an academic article; he writes in the first person to present a strongly personalised view throughout the essay, making it completely different from a formal academic article.

The article starts with a riddle for children, producing an interesting opening and aiming to show that Lu Xun is an influential name among common people, even appearing in children's games: Shandong xiaoxi—da yi renming 山东消息—打一人名 (News from Shandong, a person's name). Wang Shuo wants to comment on Lu Xun from the angle of 'one person looking at another' 一个人看另一个人 rather than

⁶¹¹ Wang Shuo 王朔 & Wang Tong 王童, 'Wang Shuo zai xian' 王朔在线 (Wang Shuo Online), *Xiaoshuo jie* 小说界 (Fiction Field), 2001, vol. 2, pp.139-145

⁶¹² Wang Shuo 王朔 & Wang Tong 王童, 'Wang Shuo Online', *Fiction Field*, 2001, vol. 2, pp.139-145

⁶¹³ Wang Shuo 王朔, 'Wo kan Lu Xun' 我看鲁迅 (Lu Xun in My Eyes), *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest), 2000, vol. 2, pp.127-132

worshipping some sacred image. Without doubt Lu Xun had been deified, with the result that his original face and thought has disappeared.

Wang Shuo's expresses the effect on him of this extreme praise saying:

'People in different fields praise him, sometimes reaching the level of obstructing us from breathing freely. I do not believe he is so perfect; such people do not exist. People treat each other much less generously, and he should not be an exception.'

Wang Shuo believes that when people can criticise Lu Xun freely or even forget about him entirely, that will be a sign of progress.⁶¹⁴

Everybody was told that Lu Xun was a great writer and a great thinker, yet when Wang Shuo asked what the essence of Lu Xun's thought, neither he nor his friends could answer.⁶¹⁵ Research on Lu Xun has been going on since the 1930s; thousands of people have written tens of thousand articles and yet have not answered this most important question, at least to the satisfaction of Wang and his friends. Wang thinks this means Lu Xun cannot match the status academics give to him nor people's expectations of him. It is no surprise that Wang Shuo harshly criticises researchers on Lu Xun:

'There is one thing I am certain of, if now Lu Xun rose from the dead, of course, his first slap would be on the faces of people who make a living studying Lu Xun, the second slap would be on the faces of those 'living Lu Xuns' 活鲁迅 and 'second Lu Xuns' 二鲁迅.⁶¹⁶

Research on Lu Xun has not made much progress in the past 50 years. People interpret Lu Xun according to the needs of official ideology. Wang Shuo's criticisms

⁶¹⁴ Wang Shuo 王朔, 'Lu Xun in My Eyes', *Harvest*, 2000, vol. 2, p.132

⁶¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.130

⁶¹⁶ *ibid.* 'Living Lu Xun' 活鲁迅 and 'second Lu Xun' 二鲁迅 are terms coined by Wang Shuo to criticise some professional researchers of Lu Xun, who think what they think and say is what Lu Xun thought and said.

are directed at people who are doing research on Lu Xun, and more widely at the general range of academic activities across the academic world.⁶¹⁷

Wang Shuo challenges especially academics and intellectuals who try to bolster the sacred image of Lu Xun. This is a continuation of Wang Shuo's criticism of intellectuals in his 'tiaokan' stories of the 1980s. People who disagreed with Wang's attitude to Lu Xun argued that this was not about Lu Xun, but part of a familiar Wang Shuo syndrome. The deputy director of the Lu Xun Museum, Chen Suyu 陈漱渝, thinks that Wang Shuo's article was written after long thought, and is not a spur-of-the-moment jotting:

'Wang Shuo as a so-called anti-establishment writer pursuing freedom; his cultural thought has its consistent features. These are: blaspheming against the sacred, eliminating the noble, rebelling against authority, and overturning tradition. His criticism of Lu Xun is part of this general scheme, and it is not just an isolated discussion of Lu Xun.'⁶¹⁸

He called Wang Shuo's criticism a kind of fashionable 'culturally cool criticism' 文化酷评.

Wang Shuo disagrees that Lu Xun's stories represent the highest standard of Chinese fiction.⁶¹⁹ He also criticised as very conceptualised (概念化 gainianhua) Lu Xun's story 'Ah Q' 阿Q, which has been praised as an ideal model. He thinks that it is a

⁶¹⁷ Wang Shuo 王朔, 'Lu Xun in My Eyes', *Harvest*, 2000, vol. 2, p.132 (各界人士对他的颂扬, 有时到了妨碍我们自由呼吸的地步)

⁶¹⁸ Ran Maojin 冉茂金, 'Jizhong yaohai de jujishou chuxian le ma?' 击中要害的狙击手出现了吗? (Has the Deadly Sniper Emerged?) *Xinhua wenzhai* 新华文摘 (Xinhua Abstracts), 2000, vol. 11, pp.110-111 (亵渎神圣, 消解崇高, 反判权力, 颠覆传统)

⁶¹⁹ Wang Shuo 王朔, 'Lu Xun in My Eyes', *Harvest*, 2000, vol. 2, p.128

matter of regret that Lu Xun did not write a novel, and 'a loss for the Chinese nation.'⁶²⁰

Lu Xun's 'fighting spirit' is greatly appreciated by Wang Shuo. He thinks Lu Xun used his pen as a banner and a dagger to fight with his enemies, and that his life was a 'soldier's life'.⁶²¹ Lu Xun encouraged intellectuals not to compromise with the various powers. His 'fighting spirit running through his whole life' 一生的战斗精神 may be the most important influence on contemporary writers.⁶²² However, after the 1950s, Lu Xun's 'fighting spirit' was downplayed; people who carried forward this spirit, for example Hu Feng 胡风, were 'rectified'. Lu Xun's name became a political football rather than a glorious banner for modern intellectuals. It has been both deified and distorted by mainstream ideology; at the end of the 1990s, the image of Lu Xun was gradually resuming its original form.

Wang Shuo thinks that the irony of this situation is that people were encouraged to praise Lu Xun's for a spirit of criticism they were not allowed to follow. He believes the first thing people should do in commenting on Lu Xun is break free of the superstitious aura surrounding him. Wang Shuo's criticism of Lu Xun and scholars who do research on him has created a divide among intellectuals.

⁶²⁰ *ibid.*, p.130

⁶²¹ *ibid.*, p.131

⁶²² Chen Sihe 陈思和, *Tan hu tan tu* 谈虎谈兔 (Talking about Tigers and Rabbits), p.476

Debate on the Criticism of Lu Xun

Some researchers support Wang's views and are honest about the situation of Lu Xun research. The deputy secretary of the Lu Xun Research Association 鲁迅研究会, Zhang Mengyang 张梦阳, reviewing his experience of nine years spent editing a book of collected research materials from 1913 to 1983, thinks that 'in more than eighty years of research papers on Lu Xun, 95% of them are empty words: stereotyped, erroneous, rubbishy and repetitive. Only at most 5% of them have any genuine ideas.' Other researchers on Lu Xun did not agree with his statistics. Zhang did his statistical work over and over again and concluded that the 5% was already an exaggeration: if there was one worthwhile article in a hundred articles, we should be grateful.⁶²³

These statistics may be shocking, and the real situation may be even worse, but academics would not admit it. Some people criticized Zhang Mengyang and rejected his judgement as well. Zhang said that was based on his own research experience:

'I was just in the process of assessing and rejecting these things myself, and associating them with the problems that exist throughout the whole Lu Xun research scene. Recalling my own situation, I had let my brain become a race-track for other people's thought for a long time, working hard on the mill of slavishness. When I think about it I can't help breaking out in a cold sweat throughout my body, and keenly feeling I must first have 'an independent spirit and free thinking', then I can talk about starting real research and writing.'⁶²⁴

Zhang gives his own valuable insight into the situation of research on Lu Xun, but very few academics were willing to follow his lead in offering a new honesty.

⁶²³ Zhang Mengyang 张梦阳, 'Wo guan Wang Shuo kan Lu Xun' 我观王朔看鲁迅 (How I See Wang Shuo's Views on Lu Xun), *Wenxue ziyou tan* 文学自由谈 (Free Literary Forum), 2000, vol. 4, pp.93-101

⁶²⁴ *ibid.*, p.96

Wang Shuo's aim is to criticise people who think they are 'guardians of Lu Xun' rather than to attack Lu Xun; he is determined to show his personal views on Lu Xun are in opposition to the official line of scholars in the university system and critics in state-owned work units. Wang's views on Lu Xun are not necessarily all correct but they are very challenging; their most important feature is Wang Shuo's insistence on an independent spirit and free thinking. He demonstrates an honesty about the truth with which people who serve the authorities cannot compare.

As the social and political environment of the country gradually relaxed, some different opinions on Lu Xun emerged. Chen Shuyu 陈漱渝 criticised some of them for being 'big on negative, destructive characteristics, and lacking in constructive characteristics.'⁶²⁵ And he pointed out:

'However, these different voices do not want to give Lu Xun an accurate historical position, but want to break away from the existing system and revolutionary tradition. Lu Xun is just a target they are using.'⁶²⁶

By contrast, some people in the cultural world recognised the merit of Wang Shuo's evaluation. The writer Liu Heng 刘恒 commented that Wang is bold and his attitude is what intellectuals lack.⁶²⁷ He pointed to a few essential things about Wang:

'Wang Shuo often speaks the truth loudly, while other people dare not speak it or else say it in a low voice. He has done a lot of pioneering work.'⁶²⁸

⁶²⁵ Ran Maojin 冉茂金, 'Has the Deadly Sniper Emerged?', *Xinhua Abstract*, 2000, vol. 11, pp.110-111

⁶²⁶ *ibid.*

⁶²⁷ Shen Wenyu 沈文愉, 'Wang Shuo: zhen shi wuzhizhe ma?' 王朔: 真是无知者吗? (Is Wang Shuo Really Ignorant?) *Beijing wanbao* 北京晚报 (Beijing Evening News), 07/05/2000, quoted from <http://edu.sina.com.cn>

⁶²⁸ 'Zuori 'wuzhizhe' you wei' 昨日 '无知者' 有 '畏' ('Yesterday's 'Ignorant' is 'Fearful') *Beijing qingnian bao* 北京青年报 Beijing Youth, 27/01/2000, <http://www.bjyouth.com.cn>

More and more people admit the significance of the contribution of Wang Shuo to Chinese culture. Without Wang Shuo, the cultural world would be a great deal poorer. The critic Ge Hongbing thinks Wang's fighting style has made him an heir to Lu Xun in contemporary China.⁶²⁹

A researcher of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, Li Jiefei 李洁非, thinks that the significance of Wang Shuo's criticism lies in the cultural rather than literary field. No matter whether one likes or dislikes Wang's comments, the significance of his voice and the massive response it generates cannot be denied. He says Wang 'addresses some important aspects of present-day culture, and touches upon the key problems in people's hearts.'⁶³⁰

Wang Shuo pursues free and lively expression in a cultural world that lacks vitality. Works produced by academics almost all lack character, are dry and dull, and often reflect official morality, hence ordinary people ignore them. The critic Zhou Limin agrees with the problems Wang Shuo pointed out, and thinks that Wang's criticism offers much food for thought, and suggests some intellectuals' criticism lacks reason.⁶³¹

By contrast, there are strong critics of Wang Shuo. A member of the Writers' Association of Shaoxing city (Lu Xun's hometown) Zhu Zhenguo 朱振国 wrote a

⁶²⁹ Ge Hongbing 葛红兵, 'Zai tan Wang Shuo' 再谈王朔 (Talking about Wang Shuo Again), *Qingkuai de rouban* 轻快的柔板 (Lively Clappers), Hebei 河北: Huashan wenyi chubanshe 花山文艺出版社, 2002, pp.37-40

⁶³⁰ Shen Wenyu 沈文愉, 'Is Wang Shuo a Real Innocent?', *Beijing Evening News*, 07/05/2000, quoted from <http://edu.sina.com.cn>,

⁶³¹ Zhou Limin 周立民, 'Wuzhi qi neng wuwei' 无知岂能无畏 (How Can the Ignorant be Without Fear), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 (Criticism on Contemporary Writers), 2000, vol. 6, pp.77-80

public letter to the China Writers' Association and *Harvest* magazine, criticising the magazine for publishing Wang Shuo's article and another two critical articles about Lu Xun.⁶³² Zhu thinks that is a 'collective bomb' aiming to belittling Lu Xun, and regards Wang Shuo's criticism of Lu Xun as 'red guard' behaviour:

'This is red guard mentality; it is the way things were done in the Cultural Revolution, like 'smashing the four olds'. Wang Shuo uses his talent in the wrong place, and he is now becoming an unbridled 'red guard' of the literary world.'⁶³³

He urges the China Writers' Association to treat the matter of 'deprecating Lu Xun' seriously and with the correct standpoint and attitude.

There are fundamental differences between Wang Shuo's criticism and 'red guard' behaviour in Cultural Revolution. Wang Shuo's criticisms are not personal attacks; he criticises cultural figures in order to criticise cultural phenomena. Cultural Revolution criticism was mostly personal attacks on people as part of political struggles, private hatred and power struggles, etc. People who were criticised at that time suffered mentally and physically, and many people's lives were destroyed with some of them even losing their lives.

Wang Shuo's usual style of criticism is to overcorrect in order to attract attention, and he wants ordinary people all to exercise their right to criticise and to participate in the debate. Taking up an extreme position, and commenting from a populist, common

⁶³² *Harvest* established a 'Zoujin Lu Xun' 走近鲁迅 (Approaching Lu Xun) column, and published three articles: Wang Shuo's 'Lu Xun in My Eyes', Feng Yicai's 冯翼才 'Lu Xun de gong yu 'guo'' 鲁迅的功与'过' (Lu Xun's Achievements and 'Mistakes'), Lin Yutang's 林语堂 old article 'Dao Lu Xun' 悼鲁迅 (Mourning Lu Xun) first published sixty-five years ago in 1937.

⁶³³ Zhu Zhenguo 朱振国, 'Bu neng tingren *Shouhuo* zazhi chaoma Lu Xun' 不能听任<收获>杂志嘲骂鲁迅 (I Cannot Let *Harvest* Mock and Abuse Lu Xun), *Zhenli de zhuiqiu* 真理的追求 (The Pursuit of Truth), 2000, vol. 7, pp.12-14

sense stance, does have the effect of stirring up controversy amongst a much broader constituency than usual and bringing 'ordinary' people into the debate.

The editor of Wang Shuo's book of collected essays, Bai Ye 白烨, was left with a tricky issue in deciding whether to include this essay or not. He praised Wang's critical attitude as being close to the original meaning of criticism, i.e. frank and fearless. However, as a representative of the publishing house, he 'had a responsibility to defend and guard' the official standpoint. After repeatedly examining the script, the publishing house decided not to include 'Lu Xun in My Eyes' in the book.⁶³⁴

Wang Shuo's article on Lu Xun, like his article on Jin Yong, provoked a big internet response. There are few other channels of free speech in China, hence the internet has become an important barometer of genuine public opinion. Comments on the internet tend to employ Wang's challenging language style, and some people feel the internet is a major factor in the spread of Wang's 'hooligan' language hegemony.⁶³⁵

The critic Ge Tao 葛涛 studied the reaction to Wang Shuo's criticism of Lu Xun on the internet. Ge Tao's conclusion was that: there were many expressions of personal feelings by ordinary people, and that experts and scholars of Lu Xun had very little influence on the internet. The effect had been to develop a dialogue about Lu Xun; he urged that the current discussions on Lu Xun on internet should be allowed to

⁶³⁴ Bai Ye 白烨, 'Bianzhe hua' 编者话 (Editor's Foreword), *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.2

⁶³⁵ Yan Lieshan 鄢烈山, 'Jin yuan baodian shang de biao'yan' 金元宝殿上的表演 (The Performance at the Gold Treasure Palace), *Nanfang zhoumo* 南方周末 (Southern Weekend), 19/05/2000, Xinyusi dianzi wenku 新语丝电子文库 (Xinyusi Electronic Library), <http://www.xys.org/xys/classics/Lu-Xun/criticism/Wangshuo2.txt>

develop.⁶³⁶ Some people have set up websites propagating Lu Xun's works and discussing his spirit and thought, to bring Lu Xun closer to ordinary people.⁶³⁷ There are no mature academic websites among them, and the number of visitors is limited, as is their influence.

Continuing Criticism of the Cultural World

As a result of Wang Shuo's criticism of intellectuals in both his stories and articles up to the mid-1990s, some academics already refused to accept Wang Shuo, and tried to ignore his works, including academics at Beijing University. In 1997, the writer Liu Xinwu 刘心武 pointed out that a series of collected works of one hundred years of literature even included two lyrics by the rock musician Cui Jian, but did not mention Wang Shuo's name, nor any of his works.⁶³⁸ Liu commented:

‘Wang Shuo himself and his works can be criticised, but we cannot obliterate their existence. It seemed as if from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, this person and these works did not exist in mainland China. No matter how, this cannot be explained.’⁶³⁹

And some critics questioned why academics did not accept Wang Shuo, and suggested they should ‘tolerate Wang Shuo’⁶⁴⁰.

⁶³⁶ Ge Tao 葛涛, ‘BBS shang bei guanshui de Lu Xun—hulianwang shang de Lu Xun’ BBS 上被灌水的鲁迅—互联网上的鲁迅 (Lu Xun Having Water Poured on Him on BBS—Lu Xun on Internet), *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* 鲁迅研究月刊 (Lu Xun Study Monthly), 2001, vol.7, pp.62-69

⁶³⁷ Ge Tao 葛涛, ‘Bei ‘e’ hua de Lu Xun’ 被 ‘e’ 化的鲁迅 (Lu Xun Has Been ‘e’-d), *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* 鲁迅研究月刊 (Lu Xun Study Monthly), 2001, vol. 6, pp.61-66

⁶³⁸ Liu Xinwu 刘心武, ‘Wang Shuo na qu le’ 王朔哪去了 (Where has Wang Shuo gone?), *Wenxue ziyou tan* 文学自由谈 (Free Forum of Literature), 1997, vol. 4, pp.24-28

⁶³⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁴⁰ Lei Mengfa 雷猛发, ‘Kuanrong Wang Shuo’ 宽容王朔 (Tolerating Wang Shuo), *Guangxi dianda jiaoyu* 广西电大教育 (Guangxi Television University Education), 1997, vol. 1, pp.39-40

After more than twenty years writing stories and working in the cultural field, Wang Shuo concludes it is a good thing that he received no formal higher education. This had originally given him an inferiority complex, but condescension from the academic world did not stop him attacking their vices:

‘I think the result of social science and humanities education in Chinese universities is no more than to train a group of knowledge slaves. Look at the articles of these professors and their best students. No matter how convoluted they are in the way they express themselves, one sentence is very clear: defend traditional moral principles. This kind of thing is what middle school teachers do, they enjoy doing it and showing their diligence over it. I really cannot appreciate this, and suspect their thought capacity.’⁶⁴¹

The situation which Wang Shuo points out is a very common one in the cultural field; scholars’ works are filled with official platitudes and traditional moral principles rather than real academic ideas. The Lu Xun and Jin Yong phenomena are two very prominent cases, and Wang Shuo’s criticisms have much broader significance for the whole cultural field. They caused people to wonder whether academic research was contributing to the development of society, or holding it back.

Some people accused Wang Shuo of cynical self-promotion in criticising cultural figures and cultural phenomena. The critic Yang Zewen 杨泽文 pointed out that Wang Shuo had profited from his media activities, promoting an image of being a fearless fighter which had made him wealthy and famous.⁶⁴²

⁶⁴¹ Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, p.106

⁶⁴² Yang Zewen 杨泽文, ‘Maren de ‘yishu’’ 骂人的‘艺术’ (The ‘Art’ of Abuse), *Kexue shibao - dushu zhoukan* 科学时报 (读书周刊) (Science Times - Reading Weekly), 17/11/2000, quoted from Xiyusi dianzi wenku 新语丝电子库 (Xinyusi Electronic Library)
<http://xys.org/xys/ebooks/literature/novels/Wang-Shuo/marenyish.txt>

To those who pointed out that Wang Shuo does not criticise politics or officials, he explained that he is not a professional revolutionary.⁶⁴³ Wang Shuo cannot offend the authorities because people who criticise politicians will become dissidents in China and be forced to live in exile or be imprisoned. For example, Yan Jiaqi 严家其 lives in exile in America and Liu Xiaobo has been in prison. Wang Shuo limits his criticism to the cultural field.

After these criticisms of Jin Yong and Lu Xun, Wang Shuo went on to write many short essays criticising various cultural phenomena and cultural figures. These included film director Zhang Yimou and TV presenter Bai Yansong 白岩松. Some of the articles were published in his book *The Ignorant Know No Fear*, while others were published in the magazine *San lian shenghuo zhouban* 三联生活周刊 (San Lian Life Weekly) in the column 'Looking at the World through A Dog's Eyes'.⁶⁴⁴ Wang Shuo became recognised as a leading figure of the new 'school of (critical) abuse' 骂派. He explains that when he criticises people he does not use his superior status to do so, and he chooses people who are also 'media heroes' to criticise, so they or their supporters will have the opportunity to respond.⁶⁴⁵

The critic Yan Lieshan 鄢烈山 criticised Wang Shuo for being highly selective in whom he will criticise; he thinks that Wang is not a mad dog since he does not bite everybody he meets:

⁶⁴³ Wang Shuo 王朔 & Wang Tong 王童, 'Wang Shuo Online', *Fiction Field*, 2001, vol. 2, pp.139-145

⁶⁴⁴ 'Gouyan kan shijie' 狗眼看世界 (Looking at the World through Dog's Eyes). Since Wang Shuo was born in the year of the dog, this is an ironic self-reference. It echoes the old Chinese saying 'gouyan kan ren di' 狗眼看人低 (be a bloody snob).

⁶⁴⁵ Wang Shuo, 'My Principles in 'Abusing' People', *Beijing Youth*, 19/03/2000, p.10

‘What kind of people is it worthwhile to bite; is the safety margin high or low? Are the inputs and outputs high or low? These have all been carefully thought through. The people he bites are all intellectuals who have no power and are timid, including living and dead cultural figures.’⁶⁴⁶

In fact, Wang Shuo’s criticism will help to prevent the emergence of cultural dinosaurs and cultural hegemony. Soon after *The Ignorant Know No Fear* was published in January 2000, Wang Shuo published a further work of criticism in August 2000, ‘Meiren zeng wo menghanyao’ 美人赠我蒙汉药 (Her Beauty is Like a Narcotic). This was in the form of a dialogue between Wang Shuo and a mysterious person called Lao Xia 老霞.⁶⁴⁷ Lao Xia’s words occupy at least half of the book. The book criticises several aspects of contemporary culture, including popular culture, intellectuals, cultural traditions, and so on. Although the book contains strong criticisms, the dialogue form of the book is like a chat, and the ideas are more diffused, diluting their impact compared to the newspaper and magazine articles.

Wang Shuo’s outspoken style created a similar response in the fine art world when he criticised the legendary figures Qi Baishi 齐白石 and Zhang Daqian 张大千. He was castigated for not understanding fine art at all. Yet, regardless of the merits or otherwise of his criticism, this was another service to the cause of criticism as a valid exercise in which a broad spectrum of the population can participate. Some critics

⁶⁴⁶ Yan Lieshan 鄢烈山, ‘Wang Shuo weishenme tongma zhishifenzi’ 王朔为什么痛骂知识分子 (Why Is Wang Shuo Laying into Intellectuals), *Pizi yingxiong* 痞子英雄 (Hooligan Hero), p.43

⁶⁴⁷ Even the editor of the book, Wu Jiang 吴江, does not know the identity of Lao Xia. The critic Chen Xiaoming, who has close contact with Wang Shuo, said Lao Xia is the dissident Liu Xiaobo 刘小波, who has a PhD in literature from Beijing Normal University.

commented positively that the fine art world could do without Wang Shuo but could not do without real criticism.⁶⁴⁸

Wang Shuo has been questioned over the fact that he criticises every field except the media and reporters. He has admitted that his relationship with the media is a cooperative one based on mutual self-interest.⁶⁴⁹ This is reflected in the way Wang Shuo has been treated as 'a legendary money tree in the cultural market'.⁶⁵⁰ Some reporters feel that Wang Shuo is one of the guarantees that the contemporary literary world is not uneventful.⁶⁵¹

The 'female Wang Shuo', Xu Kun 徐坤, is dissatisfied with Wang Shuo's criticisms. She thinks that people want him to say what ordinary people find it difficult to say, but that he fails to criticise the more essential elements. He speaks 'over-cautiously, ambiguously and indecisively', and his criticisms are very much like a profitable marketing activity.⁶⁵²

As China has emerged from its more paternalistic past, there have been many problems in developing a mature critical tradition. Wang Shuo's series of criticisms have had a positive effect in building up a genuinely critical atmosphere. On the other

⁶⁴⁸ Xu Hongquan 许宏泉, 'Guanyu Wang Shuo dui meishu de kaima' 关于王朔对美术的开骂 (Wang Shuo's Volley of Abuse on Fine Art), *Dongfang yishu* 东方艺术 (Oriental Art), 2001, vol. 5 p.106

⁶⁴⁹ Long Yin 龙音, 'Wang Shuo fawen, meiti shi shenme ren' 王朔发问, 媒体是什么人? (Wang Shuo Asks, Who Is the Media?), *Beijing qingnian bao* 北京青年报 (Beijing Youth), 23/03/2000, p.5, quoted from <http://www.bjyouth.com.cn>

⁶⁵⁰ 'Wang Shuo dianping: Wenhua shichang shang de yi ke yaoqianshu' 王朔点评: 文化市场上的一棵摇钱树 (Some Views on Wang Shuo: a Legendary Cultural Market Money Tree), 23/10/2001, Shanxi xinwen wang 山西新闻网 (Shanxi News Net) quoted from <http://www.sxrb.com/mag6/20011023/colart58995.htm>

⁶⁵¹ Shang Xiaolan 尚晓岚, 'Wang Shuo xianxiang' 王朔现象 (The Wang Shuo Phenomenon), *Beijing Youth*, 19/12/1999, p.7, quoted from <http://www.bjyouth.com.cn>

⁶⁵² Xu Kun 徐坤, 'Fanlan de duihuati' 泛滥的对话体 (Flooding Dialogue Style), *Beijing jishi* 北京纪事 (Beijing Review), Sept. 2001, vol. 18, pp.2-3

hand, there is an indication that when people, including the media, want to criticise things, they will use Wang Shuo's name to raise the temperature of the debate. To some extent, the name of Wang Shuo has become a symbol of fashionable criticism. There are many reports of his name being taken in vain by people putting forward their own criticisms. It is clear that Wang Shuo's criticism has become a tool for 'stirring the market' for himself and the media, a part of his self-promotional activities. But this is not the point: he has democratised cultural criticism, demystifying it and turning it from the preserve of a few academics into an activity for ordinary people.

Conclusion

Wang Shuo has made a major contribution to the commercialisation of Chinese culture in the last twenty years; he has been one of the most active and successful figures in the mass culture field. This is probably not unconnected with his unorthodox background as the PRC's first cultural entrepreneur. He developed an instinctive understanding of the problems of mass culture and the 'culture industry,' and an ability to criticise the industry from the inside. Untainted by the traditional intellectual disdain for money, he is blatant in his praise of the profit motive and expresses a desire to be rich and famous. He emerged as one of China's first media personalities, boosted by the effectiveness of his image creation activities with media contacts.

Yet beneath his apparent superficiality lurks an astute observer of the political and cultural worlds. His political 'criticism' is buried deep in his texts, avoiding the fate of overt dissidents, for example Su Xiaokang 苏晓康. His open criticism is limited to the culture field, such as his controversial views on Jin Yong, and Lu Xun. These initiated nationwide debates across the culture field, and pushed people to re-examine their attitudes to culture phenomena in China. Wang Shuo is very much a product of his age, but it is very much to his credit that he realised faster than almost anyone the implications the economic and political changes had for the culture, now redefined as entertainment, field. He invented himself as a 'cultural hero' as part of the commercialisation movement.

There is criticism that Wang Shuo's talents are exhausted. It is true that Wang Shuo's influence and fame are diminishing after several pinnacles in his career, and there are younger writers willing to be more explicit who may have taken over the popular literature mantle from him. Yet, no one has yet eclipsed him, and his existing achievements arguably have earned him a lasting place in history.

Indications of a willingness to compromise with authority in some of Wang Shuo's works gave the critics Lao Yu and Li Shulei 李书磊 concern. They felt there was collusion was taking place between 'mainstream culture' (i.e. 'official') and 'hooligan culture' at the end of 20th century.⁶⁵³ Wang Xiaobo criticised Wang Shuo for being too clever in trying to clothe his film *Hong ying tao* 红樱桃 (Red Cherry) in a 'mainstream' vision. He pointed out that by doing that Wang Shuo may lose out both ways: he may not win any awards from the government, yet still disappoint his audience.⁶⁵⁴

It is difficult to imagine how Wang Shuo will achieve greater fame without co-operating with the authorities, like Cao Yu 曹禺, Bing Xin 冰心 and Ba Jin 巴金 in earlier times. They compromised with socialist society and the communist authorities to become literary masters whose images and works are displayed in the Modern Literature Museum. So far Wang Shuo has resisted the temptation to do this, yet is he still capable of producing works that can satisfy readers and audiences, especially the younger generation in the 21st century?

⁶⁵³ Lao Yu 老愚, 'Wo shi xiezi' 我是蝎子 (I Am a Scorpion), Introduction, *Wang Shuo: Master Or Hooligan*, p.3

⁶⁵⁴ Wang Xiaobo 王小波, 'Wang Shuo de zuopin' 王朔的作品 (Wang Shuo's Works)
www.shuku.net/novels/wangxiaobo/wangshuo.html

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